



The PARI Journal

A quarterly publication of the Ancient Cultures Institute
Volume XXII, No. 1, 2021

In This Issue:

Shedding New Light on La Florida Stela 1: A Portrayal of Chakjal Chahk

by

Mads S. Jørgensen,
Joanne Baron and
Guido Krempel

PAGES 1-14

•

A Unique Absolute Antipassive in the Name of a K'uhul Chatahn Winik

by

Luís Lopes and Barbara
MacLeod

PAGES 15-19

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Electronic version
available at:
www.precolumbia.org/
pari/journal/2201

ISSN 1531-5398

Shedding New Light on La Florida Stela 1: A Portrayal of Chakjal Chahk

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Carved limestone monuments of the Maya lowlands are delicate artifacts, susceptible to erosion and breakage. Yet careful documentation can reveal previously unseen details even on poorly preserved inscriptions. La Florida Stela 1 is an example of this possibility. A re-examination of earlier as well as more recent photographs has revealed the name of one of the first rulers of the ancient court of Namaan, but also raises intriguing new questions.

The Archaeological Site of La Florida

The archaeological site of La Florida is located on the banks of the San Pedro Martir River, approximately 20 km from Guatemala's western border with Mexico. It is composed of several monumental and residential groups on both sides of the river; its monumental core is located to the south in what is now the town of El Naranjo Frontera, in the municipality of La Libertad in Peten (Figure 1). Edwin M. Shook (1943) was the first archaeologist to visit the site during his expedition down the San Pedro Martir River in 1943. He immediately acknowledged the site's importance due to its strategic location along this crucial east-west waterway connecting the inner Peten with the Lower Usumacinta and the Tabasco plains (Shook 1943:Fol. 23a-24a). Since then only a few studies have been conducted at the site (Morales 1998; Morley 1944; Graham 1970). The La Florida Archaeology Project,

directed by Joanne Baron, Liliana Padilla, and Christopher Martinez, is the most recent of these and has undertaken archaeological investigations since 2015 (Baron 2016; Baron et al. 2015, 2019; Padilla and Baron 2016).

Meanwhile, as glyphic decipherment advanced in the 1980s and 1990s, epigraphers identified the emblem glyph of an unknown polity interchangeably read *Maan* or *Namaan* in several Late Classic texts from various sites in the Lower Usumacinta (Figure 2) (e.g., Stuart 1985). In 1984, David Stuart recognized the same emblem glyph on Ian Graham's drawing of La Florida Stela 7 and suggested La Florida as the seat of the Namaan polity (Stuart, personal communication 2014). This argument was independently made by Stanley Guenter in 1998, Dimitri Beliaev in 1999, and Alexandre Safronov in 2000, who each visited the site and re-examined La Florida Stela 7 (Beliaev 1999; Guenter 2003:25; Zender 2002:167).¹ After a brief visit to the site in 2009, Guido Krempel (2011) identified another likely Namaan emblem glyph on the back of La Florida Stela 2, while Joanne Baron (2016) tentatively identified one on "Altar X."²

The presence of a Late Classic court at La Florida corresponds well with plaza excavations by the La Florida Archaeology

¹ Dimitri Beliaev also identified this emblem glyph on La Florida Altar G.

² Possibly the same as Graham's Stela E.

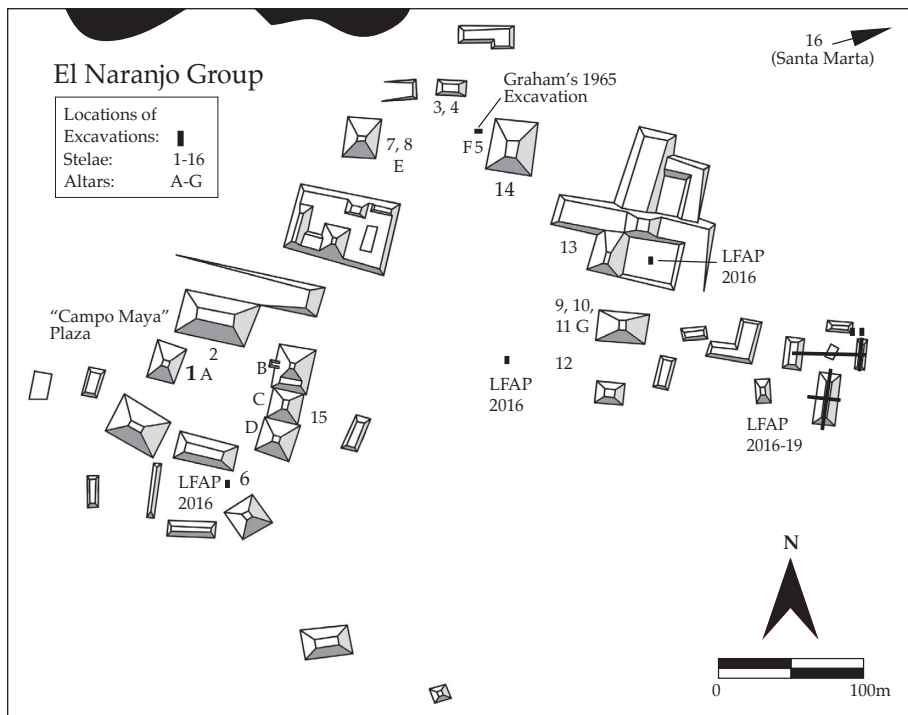
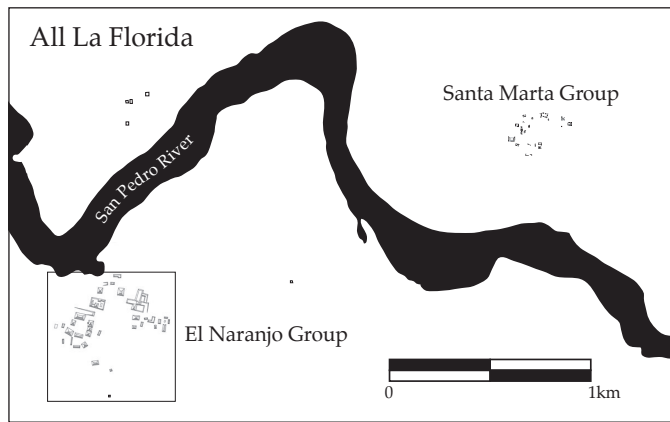
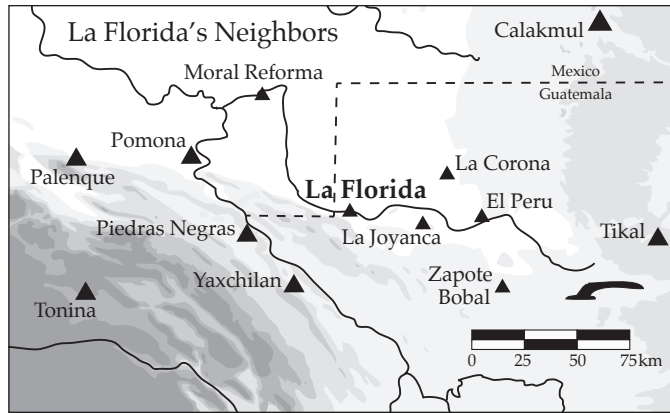


Figure 1. Maps showing the location of La Florida, and a plan of the principal groups as well as the locations of excavations and carved monuments. Figure by Joanne Baron.

Project, which has documented a shallow stratigraphy yielding a ceramic sequence which places settlement at the site from AD 600 to 800 (Baron et al. 2019; Padilla 2016).³ This occupation history is consistent with previous research at La Florida (Morales 1998:134; Sabloff in Graham 1970:432-433; Shook 1943:23a-24a) and closely matches the known mentions of the Namaan court from unprovenanced ceramics (e.g., Jørgensen and Krempel 2014; Lopes 2003; Matteo 2008; Polyukhovych 2016). One of the earliest known Namaan rulers mentioned on these ceramics was an individual named Chakjal Chahk, who we here argue was named and depicted on La Florida Stela 1.

Previous Research on La Florida Stela 1

Stela 1 is located in front of Structure N14-2, in one of the two main plazas of La Florida's ceremonial core, an area today known as the "Campo Maya." Edwin Shook located the fractured, but otherwise complete stela by "pulling the old 1937 Tikal stunt of jabbing a machete in the ground in front of the mound" (Shook 1943:Fol.21a). He noted that Stela 1 originally stood in front of the circular and carved Altar A as part of a stela-altar configuration but fell face down when temple debris hit an adjacent tree (Shook 1943:Fol. 22; see Stuart 1996).⁴ Shook sketched and photographed Stela 1 (Figure 3), but these early photographs were unfortunately never published, and their existence is only briefly mentioned in the seminal work on La Florida by Ian Graham (1970:429). Graham (1970:433-436) provided a

³ While a handful of earlier sherds have been recovered, all were located mixed into later assemblages, and no excavated contexts have so far been dated to the Early Classic.

⁴ Curiously, Ian Graham (1970:449) did not record any carved surfaces on Altar A, which might have been due to weathering in the intermediate period.

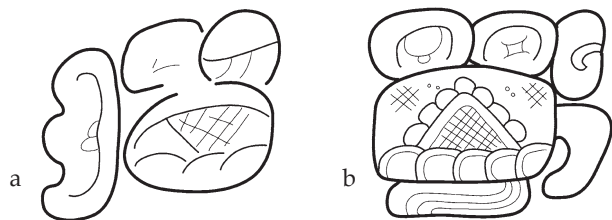


Figure 2. Namaan Emblem Glyphs: (a) Piedras Negras shell plaque; (b) Yaxchilan Lintel 45. Drawings by Joanne Baron based on photos by Joanne Baron and Alfred P. Maudslay (1889-1902:2:Pl. 97).



Figure 3. Edwin Shook with Stela 1 in 1943. Photograph by Edwin Shook, courtesy of the Shook Archive at Universidad del Valle, Guatemala City; Shook n.d.:3264. Reproduced with permission.

much-needed formal description of the monument based on his four-day expedition to the site in 1965 before being driven off the land. He published the first drawing of the monument (Figure 4a) and listed it as a limestone stela measuring ca. 2.45 m in height, width ranging from 1.29 m to 1.42 m, an approximate thickness of 0.29 m, and up to 3.1 cm depth of relief (Graham 1970:436). He located the stela in front of Structure N14-2 in a similar place and condition to that noted by Shook two decades earlier. Stela 1 seemingly remained in place to the present day, although now in a significantly worse condition due to repeated milpa burnings and being exposed to wear and tear (located directly behind a football goal), as well as modern day vandalism (Baron et al. 2015; see

also Morales 1998:131).

Thanks to photographs and drawings by Shook (1943) and Graham (1970), as well as more recent photos by Christian Heck and Bruce Love, it has been possible to produce a new drawing of the front of La Florida Stela 1, the only carved surface of the monument (Figures 4 and 5).

Identifying the Protagonist

La Florida Stela 1 shows a standing ruler in profile towering over a diminutive kneeling man (Figure 5). The ruler wears an elaborate feathered *ko'haw* war-helmet in the shape of the rain god Chahk (God B) or the Witz'



Figure 4. La Florida Stela 1: (a) drawing by Ian Graham (1970:Fig.4b, Gift of Ian Graham, 2004 © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, reproduced with permission); (b) photo by Bruce Love.

“Water Lily Serpent” of running water (Stuart 2007). The headdress features an uncommon motif which occurs only a handful of times in the general Usumacinta and Peten regions between the sixth and mid-eighth centuries (Figure 6) (Nielsen et al. 2019:10-12; Reents-Budet et al. 2007:1419). The motif consists of three main elements. In all examples known to us, stylised feathers flank a central rounded element which has been described as a mirror (Nielsen et al. 2019:4-5) but we consider more closely resembles a shield.⁵ On La Florida Stela 1 the shield features a scroll-eye, a trait shared with several other examples (Figure 6a, d–e, g). On Piedras Negras Stela 8 and 35 an **AHK’AB** “darkness” sign replaces the scroll-eye (Stuart and Graham 2003:44), whereas

the head of a deity often marked by an **AHK’AB** sign (T1013) takes its place on the Brussels Stela (Figure 6b–c, f–g).⁶ The third and final element to the other side of the shield shows an obsidian blade protruding from the

⁵ Shields and mirrors are not mutually exclusive categories in this context, since the intended meaning was likely an object that reflects light. The iconographic elements within the mirror/shield may relate to non-solar sources of light such as by fire (JGU), the dim reflection of mirrors (**AHK’AB**), or eyes/pyrite mirrors (scroll-eye motif) (Elisabeth Wagner, personal communication 2021).

⁶ This unprovenanced monument from the general Usumacinta region is currently part of the Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire collection in Brussels, Belgium (inv. No. AAM 66-34).



Figure 5. La Florida Stela 1: drawing by Joanne Baron based on photographs by Edwin Shook (n.d.:3263), Ian Graham, and Bruce Love.

maws of a centipede. Centipedes frequently personify blades of obsidian or flint, especially in scenes displaying capture-taking or rulers wearing military regalia (Figure 7) (Graham and von Euw 1975:27; Mathews 1980:63; Mayer 1978:Cat. no. 1, 1995:82). The centipede association with weaponry likely stems from their aggressive and venomous nature, as well as rapid movements and inhabiting dark subterranean spaces linked to death and the underworld (Taube 2003:406-418). This is exemplified on the Temple of the Sun Tablet at Palenque where two spears transform into centipedes through zoomorphic spearheads and centipede feet adorning the shafts (Maudslay 1889-1902:4:Pl. 88; Stuart 2006:160; see also Matthews 1980:68; Schele 1990:2). The centipede

spears cross a shield adorned by the scroll-eyed Jaguar God of the Underworld who often dons shields in war-related imagery and moreover bears **AHK'AB** "darkness" signs on its cheeks (Houston and Taube 2000:284; Stuart 2006:161). This provides an interesting parallel to the interchangeable scroll-eye and **AHK'AB** elements inserted in the shield as part of the headdress motif under discussion here, which likely refers to this exact deity (Figure 6). The Brussels Stela may provide supporting evidence for this assertion, as a jaguar paw here substitutes for the obsidian blade emerging from the maw of the centipede (Figure 7).

Considering all three elements together, and the headdress motif's exclusivity in war-related imagery, a clear militaristic theme appears. In line with this theme, we interpret the zoomorphic obsidian blade and the tail feathers to make up two ends of a dart, where the middle section is covered by a shield in a variant of the recognizable dart-and-shield (or *took' pakal*) emblem of war. On La Florida Stela 1 the motif serves to strengthen the militaristic theme set by the *ko'haw* helmet and the kneeling subordinate, in a portrayal of a powerful warrior-king.

Yet La Florida Stela 1 cannot exclusively be considered a war monument, since the elaborate bicephalic ceremonial bar dominates the scene. The bar is adorned in either end with fabric and sprouting leaves fixed to oval ornamentation, a configuration known from El Peru Stelae 2, 23, and 24, Quirigua Stela J, and Altar de Sacrificios Stelae 7 and 9 (Graham 1972:25, Fig. 16, 33, Fig. 23; Guenter 2004:Fig. 11a; Schele andLooper 1996:120). From the maws of the two serpents emerge the Jaguar God of the Underworld and a deity with an elongated forehead which cannot be securely identified. The ruler also displays a large jade earspool and a beaded "huipil" containing three inlaid masks, as well as a bird head by the hip atop which could be part of his vestment or a small shield. At the back he carries three celts attached to the head of a jaguar, perhaps displaying either an ancestor or a jaguar trophy head (Martin 2004:Note 10; Helmke 2020:32).

Evaluating the complete iconographic program, there can be little doubt that the ruler uses La Florida Stela 1 to legitimize his sociopolitical position by demonstrating command of two key pillars of rulership: military might and religious ideology. Yet considering this clear display of rulership, it is perhaps surprising that the protagonist is named in a caption consisting of only two glyphs (D1-E1) located above his headdress (Figure 8a).

The first glyph block, D1, is written **u-BAAH-T120** and uses the undeciphered scroll-like sign T120 in the final position. This is a rare variant of the common *ubaah* or *ubaahil* "his image" or "the image of" expression serving to introduce depicted individuals (Knub et al. 2009:183-184; Martin 2006:180, n. 4; see also Houston

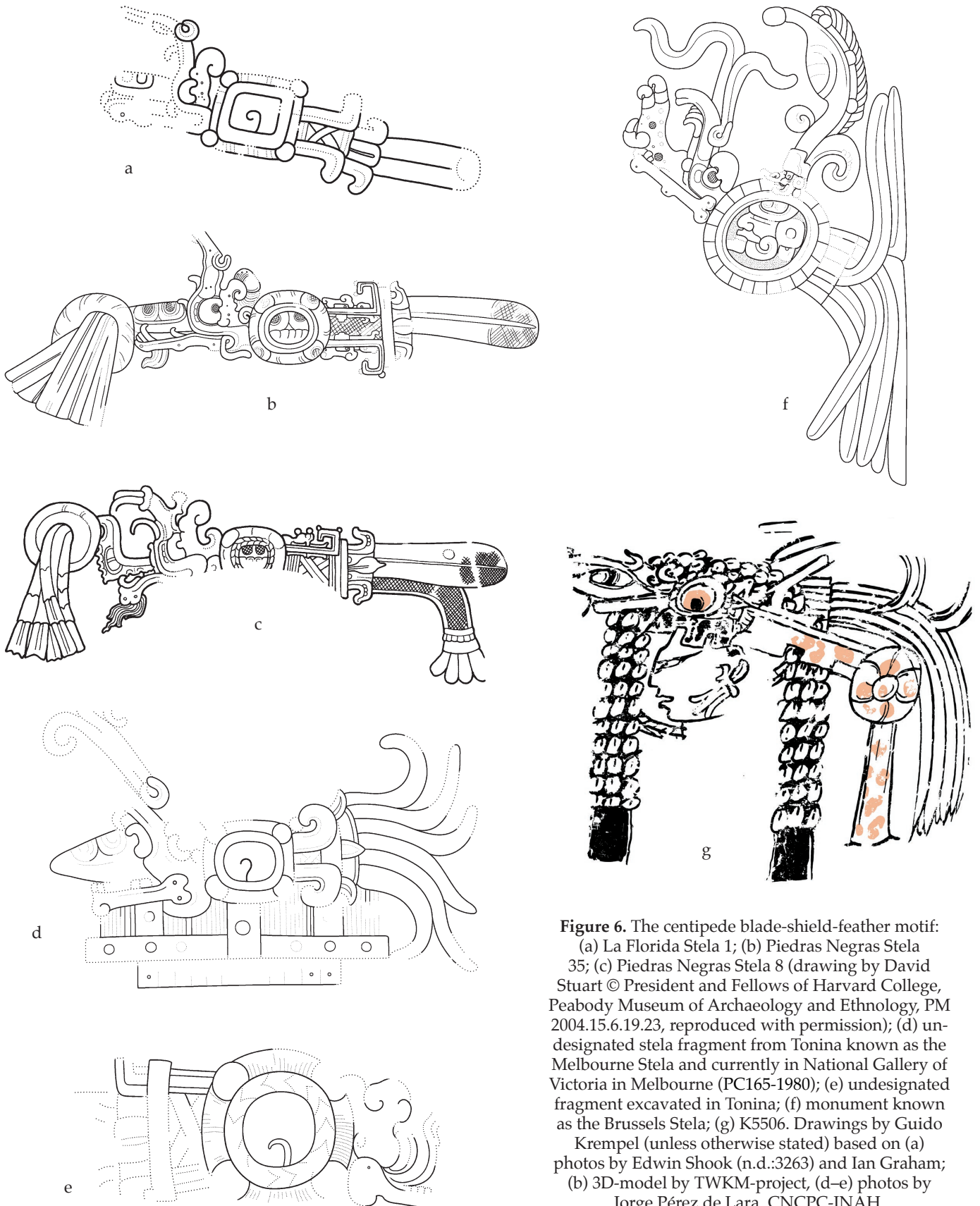


Figure 6. The centipede blade-shield-feather motif:

(a) La Florida Stela 1; (b) Piedras Negras Stela 35; (c) Piedras Negras Stela 8 (drawing by David Stuart © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM 2004.15.6.19.23, reproduced with permission); (d) undesignated stela fragment from Tonina known as the Melbourne Stela and currently in National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne (PC165-1980); (e) undesignated fragment excavated in Tonina; (f) monument known as the Brussels Stela; (g) K5506. Drawings by Guido Krempel (unless otherwise stated) based on (a) photos by Edwin Shook (n.d.:3263) and Ian Graham; (b) 3D-model by TWKM-project, (d-e) photos by Jorge Pérez de Lara, CNCPC-INAH.

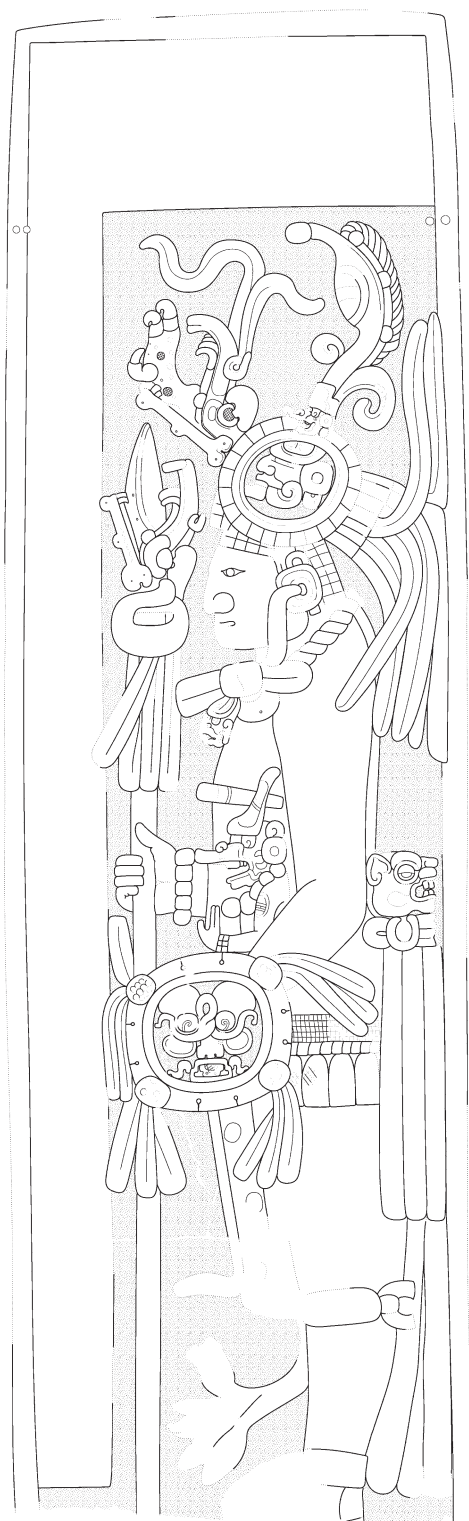


Figure 7. Imagery of the “Brussels Stela” showing a ruler in military regalia holding a centipede spear and adorned with the centipede blade-shield-feather motif. Drawing by Guido Krempel based on photographs by Sebastián Matteo.

and Stuart 1996:297-299; Proskouriakoff 1968:248). Three examples from other Maya texts use the same spelling as La Florida Stela 1 (**u-BAAH-T120**), while another two are written **u-BAAH-li-T120**, conserving the *-il* absolute suffix in the possessed form (Helmke and Nielsen 2014:139; Houston 2008:2; see also Houston et al. 2001; Houston and Stuart 1998:76). On La Florida Stela 1, this expression introduces the protagonist whose name is written in glyph E1 as **CHAK-ja-CHAHK** (Figure 8b). The head variant of Chahk is identified by its prominent forehead and partially visible *spondylus* earplug, which are known diagnostic attributes of the Classic-period rain god (e.g., Barrios 2009:35ff; Taube 1992:22). This name is well known from several unprovenanced ceramic vessels belonging to the Namaan king Chakjal Chahk (Jørgensen and Krempel 2014:105-106; Lopes 2003:14-16; Matteo 2008; Polyukhovych 2016:14-17). An unprovenanced bowl now in a private collection (Hellmuth 1987:165) uses a **CHAK-ja** spelling identical to La Florida Stela 1, including the Namaan emblem glyph (Figure 8c). Other vessels employ spelling variations, including **CHAK-ja[la]**⁷ on a dish, and **CHAK-ja-la** on a bowl belonging to his son, and all but the latter vessel name this individual as Namaan Ajaw (Figure 8c-d).⁸ These examples allow us to transcribe the name on La Florida Stela 1 as *Chakjal[il] Chahk*,⁹ underspelling the **la** syllabogram of Chakjal (Zender 1999:135-142). The estimated dating of the monument further supports his identification as the Namaan king previously known from the ceramic corpus.

Dating La Florida Stela 1

While there is no secure calendrical information preserved on the stela (see below), an approximate dating remains achievable using paleographic evidence (see Helmke and Nielsen 2014). As noted above, Glyph D1 contains a rare variant of the *ubaah(il)* “his image” verbal expression written **u-BAAH-T120**, where T120 references an undeciphered scroll-like sign. Four of the five occurrences of this expression discussed above have previously been dated to between 493 and 633 CE (Helmke and Nielsen 2014:138; Knub et al. 2009:183; Martin 2006:Note 4). The example on El Zotz Lintel 1 has, to our knowledge, not previously been discussed, but can be dated to the end of the sixth century (Garrison et al. 2012:61, Fig. 3.1; Houston 2008:Fig. 2; see also Garrison et al. 2013:740; Laporte 2006) and thus further supports the above temporal distribution. Stylistically, La Florida Stela 1 exhibits hallmark traits of the Late Classic period, which makes the latter part of the 493–633 CE range the more likely candidate.¹⁰ This corresponds well with the lifetime of Namaan

⁷ An infixed **la** may also be present on Stela 1, though erosion makes this difficult to say for certain (Nikolai Grube, personal communication 2021).

⁸ The unprovenanced bowl owned by the unnamed son of Chakjal Chahk also records the son’s mother Lady Xiiw? K’in Winikhaab Chak Oh’l Ti’. For the tentative Xiiw? reading, see Martin 2012:72, n. 12.

⁹ His nominal phrase can loosely be translated as “Reddening Chahk” using the inchoative marker of adjectives *-jal* (Houston et al. 2001:Fig. 21, Table 13).

¹⁰ It should be noted that the known occurrences of the uncommon centipede-shield-feather motif broadly support this estimated temporal distribution. The Melbourne Stela from Tonina is the earliest reference tentatively dated to AD 514–596 (Nielsen et al. 2019:10-12). The next chronological reference originates from the Brussels Stela dated to 593, followed by Piedras Negras Stela 35 mentioning military campaigns by Piedras Negras Ruler 2 in 662. His son, Ruler 3, mirrors this sculptural program in 731 on Piedras Negras Stela 8. Lastly, K5506 is owned by a Sak Muwaan from the Ik’ Court of Motul de San José known to have lived 701–726 (Reents-Budet et al. 2007:1419).



a

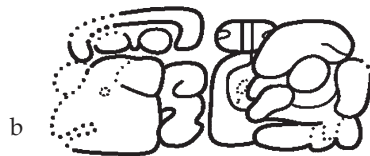


Figure 8. The nominal phrase of Namaan king Chakjal Chahk: (a–b) glyphs D1–E1 on La Florida Stela 1 (photograph by Edwin Shook, courtesy of the Shook Archive at Universidad del Valle, Guatemala City; Shook n.d.:3263, reproduced with permission); (c) **CHAK-ja CHAHK** “bent cauc” **ya-AJAW TE’ na-MAAN-ni AJAW** recorded on an unprovenanced Saxche Orange Polychrome bowl in a private collection (Hellmuth 1987:Fig. 336); (d) **CHAK-ja[la] CHAHK na-MAAN-ni AJAW**, from a ceramic dish currently in Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire, Brussels, Belgium (inv. no. AAM 66-14); (e) **CHAK-ja-la**, from an unprovenanced Saxche Orange Polychrome bowl in a private collection. Drawings by Joanne Baron based on (b) photo by Edwin Shook (n.d.:3263), (c) drawing by Hellmuth (1987:Fig. 336), (d) Sebastián Matteo, and (e) Raphael Tunesi.

king Chakjal Chahk (c. 560–620 CE) known from the ceramic corpus (Jørgensen and Krempel 2014; see also Lopes 2003; Muñoz 2003:64, 2006:149-152).¹¹ There can thus remain little doubt that La Florida Stela 1 was commissioned by the Namaan king Chakjal Chahk previously known only from the ceramic corpus. This not only strengthens the argument for La Florida as the seat of the ancient Namaan Court, it also makes La Florida Stela 1 the earliest known monument at the site, and the only known image of the Namaan king Chakjal Chahk.¹²

The Remaining Text

The principal text on La Florida Stela 1 consists of four glyph blocks (A1–B2) located directly above the kneeling male figure (Figure 9). Unfortunately, these glyphs are in poor condition and cannot be securely read. One strong possibility is that they contain calendrical information, since it is absent from other, more legible sections of the text. Glyph A1a may contain the Tzolk'in information of the calendar round, since both Graham's drawing of the monument and photos taken by Bruce Love show a circular element possibly representing a day name cartouche. Glyph A1b may then contain some combination of "Glyph G" and "Glyph F" of the supplementary series, recording the nine-day "Lord of the Night" cycle. Following this possibility to its logical conclusion, Glyph B1 would contain the Haab information, with the two glyph blocks conforming to the local La Florida pattern of recording dates, also seen on Stelae 6, 7, 8, 9, 16, and Altar G. While B1 does contain the syllabic *ma*, present in month names Mak and the Sijoom "color months," insufficient information exists to establish a secure reading.

The text of Stela 1 continues with glyph blocks A2 and B2. Unfortunately, A2 is in very poor condition, making any reading problematic. The outlines of B2 are better preserved, but they also offer a range of possible readings, none of which are secure. By analogy to other monuments, the most likely readings include (1) a title, possibly a badly eroded Namaan emblem glyph (as suggested by Helmke, personal communication 2021); (2) calendrical information, here possibly **TZUTZ WI' HO' TUUN-ni** denoting a 15-year period ending—unfortunately, no satisfactory calendrical reconstruction of Glyphs A1 and B1 corresponds to such a period ending; (3) the proper name of the stela, with A1 then representing a dedicatory verb; (4) a deity name.

The final two glyph blocks of the monument (C1–C2) are placed in front of the kneeling figure with outstretched hands (Figure 10). Lines around his shoulders represent a draped cape identifying him as a subordinate of Chakjal Chahk. His name is recorded in C1 and can despite erosion be transliterated as **K'AN-na-?-la-?**. C2 follows with his title, beginning with the agentive **AJ**. This title most likely represents his place of

origin, although the eroded glyph block could not be definitively matched to any known toponyms. Regrettably, the poor preservation of the latter two glyph panels limits our understanding of the complete message Chakjal Chahk wished to convey on La Florida Stela 1.

Final Remarks

La Florida Stela 1 has suffered considerable erosion and damage. Yet with careful examination of photographs produced by different investigators, it has yielded some of its secrets. Most significantly, the monument was commissioned by the Namaan ruler Chakjal Chahk, who is seen displaying all insignia of rulership and authority on this monument.¹³ Thus, Stela 1 adds to the preponderance of evidence linking the modern site of La Florida to the ancient Namaan kingdom. Iconographic analysis has moreover identified a regional militaristic motif, which ties the local beliefs into a wider geographical context, and which deserves further analysis to determine its true spatial distribution. Yet other questions remain of which the most intriguing, perhaps, is the event recorded in glyph blocks A2 and B2. The significance of this sentence for the overall interpretation of the monument will elude us until earlier photographs of the stela or new texts emerge. The latter remains equally true for the origin of the kneeling figure at the feet of Chakjal Chahk, whose identity may shed some light on the extent of the early Namaan kingdom. Very little is yet known about the Namaan court, but through continued study of the local monumental corpus as well as archaeological excavations at the site a more complete picture is starting to emerge.

¹¹ Supporting evidence for the approximate AD 560–620 reign of Namaan king Chakjal Chahk comes from two unprovenanced dishes owned by him featuring the rare *yajaljib* vessel type, which are currently housed in the site museum at Pomona, Tabasco (inv. no. 10-422277), and Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels, Belgium (inv. no. AAM 66-14) (Boot 2004; Matteo 2008; Zabé et al. 1999:46; see also Lopes 2003). Only two dishes and one sherd bearing this rare vessel type have to our knowledge been excavated archaeologically. One from Tikal Burial 195, the alleged resting place of Tikal king K'inich Waaw AD 573–628 (Culbert 1993:Bu. 195; Guenter 2002:96-100, 303-307; Martin and Grube 2008:40). A second *yajaljib* dish, a Saxche Orange Polychrome: Huisquil variety (CR-V42), was recently recovered from Structure 13R-10, Offering 1 in La Corona, and assigned to the Tepeu 1 sphere AD 600–650 (Ponce 2014:120-140). Lastly, a ceramic sherd showing this vessel type was excavated in Piedras Negras (Boot 2004; Houston et al. 1998:Fig. 2).

¹² The earliest securely dated monument at La Florida is Stela 6 located near Stela 1 in a secondary context north of Structure N14-9 and recording the calendar round date 12 Ahau 8 Ceh, corresponding to the period ending 9.11.0.0.0 in AD 652 (Baron 2017; Morales 1998:131, Fig. 6).

¹³ Considering that Altar A was originally discovered in front of Stela 1 as part of a stela-altar configuration, it seems reasonable to assume that Chakjal Chahk also commissioned the former.



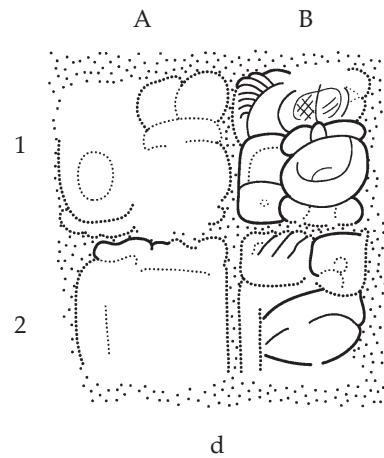
a



b



c



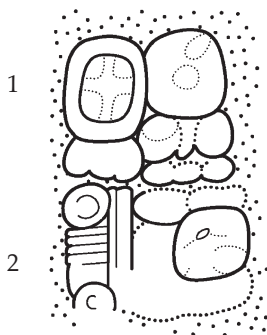
d

Figure 9. La Florida Stela 1 glyphs A1–B2: (a) photo by Ian Graham (Gift of Ian Graham, 2004 © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM 2004.15.13.3688, reproduced with permission); (b) photo by Christian Heck from the 1990s; (c) photo by Bruce Love from 2020; d) drawing by Joanne Baron. Photographs reproduced with permission.



a

c



b

Figure 10. La Florida Stela 1 glyphs C1–C2: (a) photo by Christian Heck, reproduced with permission; (b) drawing by Joanne Baron based on photographs by Ian Graham, Christian Heck, and Bruce Love.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala for making Edwin Shook’s notebooks and photographs of his visit to La Florida available for study and publication. We also thank the Peabody Museum at Harvard University for allowing us to study and publish Graham’s photographs of Stela 1. Sincere thanks go to Christian Heck and Bruce Love for kind permission to study and publish their photographs of the stela, to Christian Prager and the Text Database and Dictionary of Classic Maya Project for having shared a caption of their 3D model of Piedras Negras Stela 35. Ángel S. Sánchez Gamboa of the CNCPC-INAH Project and Jorge Pérez de Lara also deserve mention for advice on, access to, and photos of Tonina monuments relevant for the iconographic analysis. Christophe Helmke, Simon Martin, Dmitri Beliaev, Elisabeth Wagner, and Nikolai Grube provided us useful comments on an earlier draft of this article. The community of El Naranjo, especially auxiliary mayor Alfredo Morales and Professor Victor Hugo Carranza, have given invaluable assistance to the La Florida Archaeology Project over the years, and we thank the community for its ongoing work in caring for La Florida’s monuments. Any errors or shortcomings are the sole responsibilities of the authors.

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