



The PARI Journal

A quarterly publication of the Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute
Volume IV, No 1, Summer 2003

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www.mesoweb.com/
pari/journal/0401

ISSN 1531-5398

Longer Live the King: The Questionable Demise of K'inich K'an Joy Chitam of Palenque

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Tonina's Monument 122 (Figure 1) is certainly one of the most famous of all Maya figural sculptures. Peter Mathews was the first to see that the bound yet richly dressed captive is named by the three glyphs on his leg as the Palenque king K'inich K'an Joy Chitam (see Becquelin and Baudez 1982:846). The accompanying caption features a "star" verb for war, and naturally suggests that the Palenque ruler was captured by Tonina on 9.13.19.13.3 13 Ak'b'al 16 Yax, the widely accepted placement for the Calendar Round recorded on the panel (Mathews 2001). From this it has often been assumed that K'inich K'an Joy Chitam was sacrificed soon thereafter (Schele and Freidel 1990:424), and the lack of a death record for him in Palenque's texts seemed to agree with this long-held interpretation.

In this note I would like to raise questions about such widely accepted interpretations of the history of Palenque and Tonina. I do not cast doubt on the general significance of Monument 122 as a historical record of K'inich K'an Joy Chitam's subjugation by Tonina, but I do suggest that the king may have continued to live and rule for nearly a decade beyond his supposed demise. Schele (1992) in fact first raised the possibility that K'inich K'an Joy Chitam (whom she called "Kan-Hok-Xul") lived well beyond



Figure 1. Tonina, Monument 122, depicting the Palenque lord K'an Joy Chitam as a bound prisoner. Drawing by Ian Graham, Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions Program.

his capture, but the scenario I posit differs from hers in one key detail: whereas Schele saw indirect clues suggesting that the royal captive was held hostage at Tonina for an extended period until his death, I believe he continued to reign at Palenque as an active and very "present" ruler.

K'inich K'an Joy Chitam is named in three inscriptions in connection with dates that fall after his supposed capture. One case on Palenque's Palace Tablet (Figure 2) has been known for years, and it has presented a vexing problem for the conventional interpretation of events. This final passage of the lengthy text records the dedication of the north gallery of the Palace (House

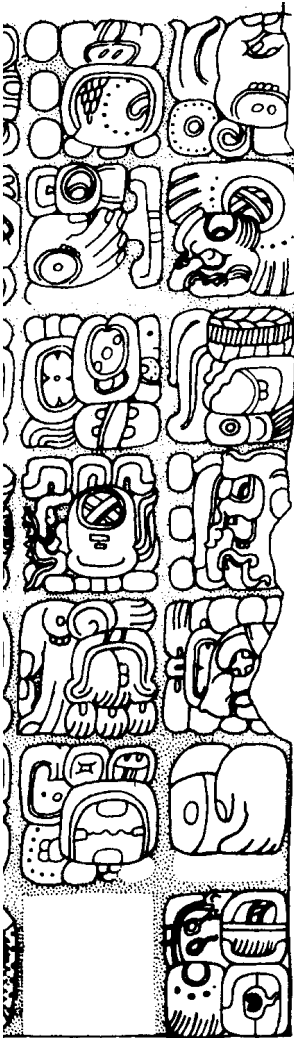


Figure 2. The final dedicatory passage of the Palace Tablet from Palenque. Drawing by Linda Schele.

Joy Chitam, further associating him with the building (see Robertson 1985:Fig. 252). This presumably dates roughly to the time of the gallery's dedication, if not somewhat later.

A second and previously unknown record of the Palenque ruler appears on Stela 8 from Piedras Negras (Figure 3). There we find his name – eroded but I think just recognizable – in association with an event on 9.14.2.11.9 6 Muluk 7 Mol, nearly four years after his presumed capture date. Unfortunately the verb and other associated glyphs in this passage are eroded, but it is perhaps significant that the previous passage on Stela 8 seems to record an event also involving another foreign ruler, namely a ruler from Santa Elena, a politically important

A-D), where the tablet was found in 1949. The associated dedication date is 9.14.8.14.15 9 Men 3 Yax. According to this final passage, a man bearing the title *Ux Yop Hu'n*, "Three Leaves Headband" (this title appears with personal names in other Maya inscriptions) owned the building. After the still-untranslated expression **ye-te-je** we find the name glyph for K'inich K'an Joy Chitam, "the Holy Lord of Palenque." There the main inscription ends, without any other indication of another royal figure at the house dedication. I have long taken this as good evidence that the king is present and an active participant in the dedication of House A-D, but the dedication date comes approximately nine years after the war recorded on Tonina's Monument 122. It is probably also significant that one of the fallen piers of the gallery once bore a standing portrait of K'inich K'an

center on the lower Río San Pedro. This Piedras Negras citation is significant, for it may suggest that K'inich K'an Joy Chitam was politically independent to some degree, and had direct relations with distant kingdoms only a few years after the Tonina defeat.

A third text, again from Palenque, offers more suggestive evidence of K'inich K'an Joy Chitam's extended life. The so-called K'an Tok Panel from Group XVI is one of the very latest texts thus far discovered at

Palenque (Figure 4), and presents a remarkable history of nobles who occupied a junior office within Palenque's court over the course of several centuries (Bernal Romero 2002). Palenque rulers oversaw the accession rites of these high-ranking figures throughout the Classic period, and the names of several familiar kings appear as the "overseers" of the subordinate inaugurations. Among the

name of Late Classic rulers we find the "3-Axe-Earth" glyph that can only refer to K'inich K'an Joy Chitam, whose complete name on the panel is now missing. He is said here to have overseen the installation of one Janahb' Ajaw, likewise a grandson of K'inich Janahb' Pakal, as a junior official, yet the date given for this event is in all likelihood 9.14.7.0.15 6 Men 13 K'ank'in, according to my own reconstruction. Once more this falls a

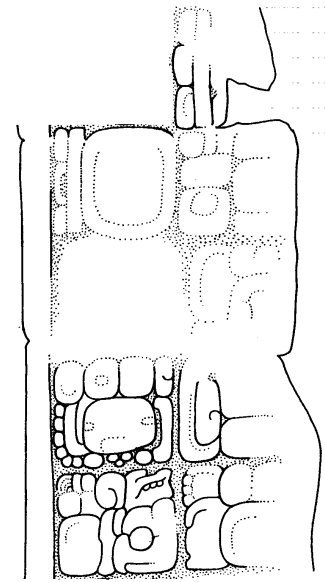


Figure 3. Passage from the right side of Piedras Negras, Stela 8, possibly citing K'inich K'an Joy Chitam. Drawing by David Stuart, Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions.

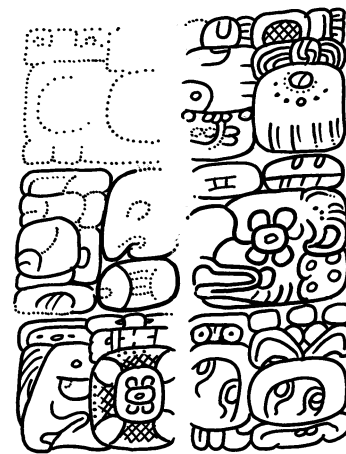


Figure 4. Passage from the K'an Tok panel from Palenque. Inking by David Stuart, after preliminary drawing by Linda Schele and Peter Mathews.

number of years after the war event recorded at Tonina, and strongly points to the king being alive and in power at the time.

These later dates, if I understand them correctly, present an unusual conundrum for Maya historiographers. Monument 122 at Tonina is an unequivocal depiction and record of the Palenque king as a bound prisoner, yet the texts we have surveyed offer, I think, a compelling case that K'inich K'an Joy Chitam did not die at that time. How do we reconcile such seemingly contradictory evidence? One might call into question the Long Count placement of the CR on Monument 122, 13 Ak'b'al 16 Yax, but there seems little room to maneuver around the widely accepted date of 9.13.19.13.3 offered by Mathews. Unless there is an error of some sort in the sculpted date, this is the only acceptable placement in the reign of K'inich K'an Joy Chitam.

The resolution to the problem comes, I believe, from the history of the Río Pasión region, and specifically the belligerent relations that seem to have existed between Seibal and the Petexbatun sites of Dos Pilas and Aguateca. Epigraphers have long known of the "star war" waged against Seibal by Ruler 3 of Dos Pilas on 9.15.4.6.5 9 Chikchan 18 Muwan. This resulted in the capture and subsequent display of the Seibal ruler Yich'aak B'alam six days later, at which time he is portrayed as a bound and altogether defeated figure on two Petexbatun monuments (Figure 5). However, it is clear that Yich'aak B'alam did not die at the time of Seibal's military defeat. Later records at Seibal make it clear that that he was alive as late as 9.15.15.0.0, at which time he witnessed a period-ending ritual involving Ruler 4 of Dos Pilas (Figure 6). Yich'aak B'alam had in fact outlived his captor, and he was actively ruling Seibal for several

years, though probably still under the political control of Dos Pilas. The portraits of the bound ruler at Dos Pilas and Aguateca are images of a living *ajaw* who would retain some degree of local power *at* Seibal for many years to come.

I suggest a similar scenario can account for the evidence surrounding K'inich K'an Joy Chitam of Palenque. The "star war" with Tonina was real enough, but the dynastic consequences of Palenque's military defeat seem to have

long been misinterpreted. The Palenque king was apparently not sacrificed, but was kept on the Palenque throne, perhaps even for several years under the watchful eye of Tonina's ruler.

It is possible that after a time K'inich K'an Joy Chitam had regained enough political autonomy to oversee dedication rites and the installation of junior officials within the Palenque sphere. We still lack a firm date for his true death, but I suspect it came soon after the dedication of the Palace's north gallery, perhaps during the year or so leading up to the inauguration of his successor, K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb', on 9.14.10.4.2.

Understandably we often characterize Maya warfare in dire and fatalistic terms, so that a nobleman's "capture" as recorded in history quickly becomes, in our own analysis, a "capture and sacrifice." Yet it is important to keep in mind that the consequences of Maya warfare are never clearly spelled out in the inscriptions. Perhaps one's

"capture" should be taken at face value when further elaboration is missing. Abducted nobles surely met violent and perhaps even prolonged deaths, but high kings, once captured, might have been more highly valuable alive as political hostages or vassals. The "quick death" view for the treatment of captured kings – and there are not many cases to compare in Maya history – has perhaps

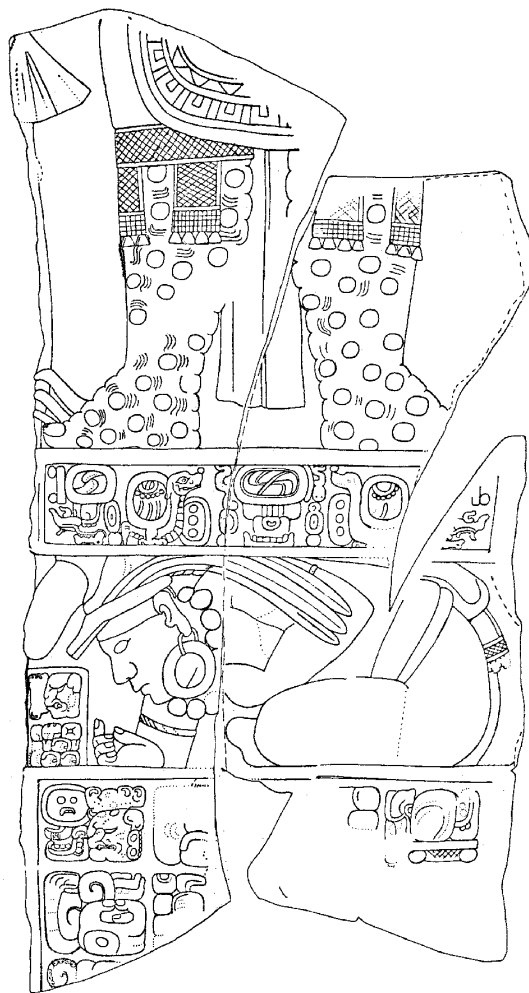


Figure 5. The Seibal ruler Yich'aak B'alam, shown on lower fragments of Dos Pilas, Stela 2. Preliminary drawing by Peter Mathews.

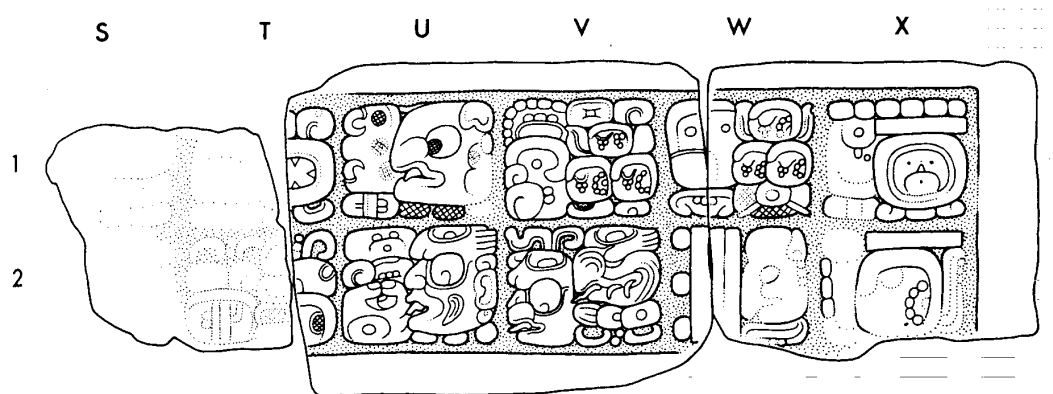


Figure 6. Seibal, Hieroglyphic Panel. Drawing by Ian Graham, *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions*.

been heavily influenced by the history surrounding the defeat and beheading of Copan's Ruler 13 by Quirigua. At Quirigua we do have clear records of the Copan ruler's sacrifice, but it is a unique case, significantly different from other Maya records of conquest. We find no "capture" glyphs or "star" events associated with that episode, suggesting that the circumstances of the Quirigua-Copan war were not representative of the other conflicts in the central lowlands and the Usumacinta region. Maya rulers and their kingdoms fought under very different circumstances, and we should reasonably assume that some losers, like K'inich K'an Joy Chitam, lived longer than others. It remains to be seen how independent these defeated lords were once they returned to their own communities, but clearly the evidence as it now stands should have important implications for interpreting the overall nature and political context of Maya warfare.

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