

A New Monument Mentioning Wamaaw K'awiil of Calakmul

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Introduction

Recently a small monument in a private collection came to my attention, and upon examination and decipherment it was found to name a little-known king of Calakmul (Figure 1). Due to its shape it must have been an element of a step from a monumental stairway. Given other examples (such as the panels from La Corona), it is possible that it was accompanied by further blocks with more texts and iconography. The carving shows a scene during a ballgame, with two facing opponents. Between them we see a stepped structure and the big rubber ball, as well as two L-shaped glyphic captions for the players.

The object's conservation is acceptable, even if large scars of erosion pass through the middle of the scene. Some parts, like the two final glyphic collocations and the headdress of the individual on the right, have suffered considerable erosion. The monument measures 50

x 42 cm at its maximum width and height. Originally the block was deeper, but it was sawn for transportation when removed from its original context. The exact place of origin is unknown.

The Iconography

The ballgame is often represented in Maya art. We have many vessels, stone monuments, and figurines that provide us with pictures of players and of the game itself. The painted vases of the Late Classic (Figure 2) are very informative, as they show scenes related to the iconography of this monument. Both players wear heavy yokes, probably of leather and/or wood. Their knees are also protected with special pads. The element that differentiates them from one another is the headdress. In all Mesoamerican cultures, the headdress is where the most iconographic information can be found.

Here the two headdresses divide the players into

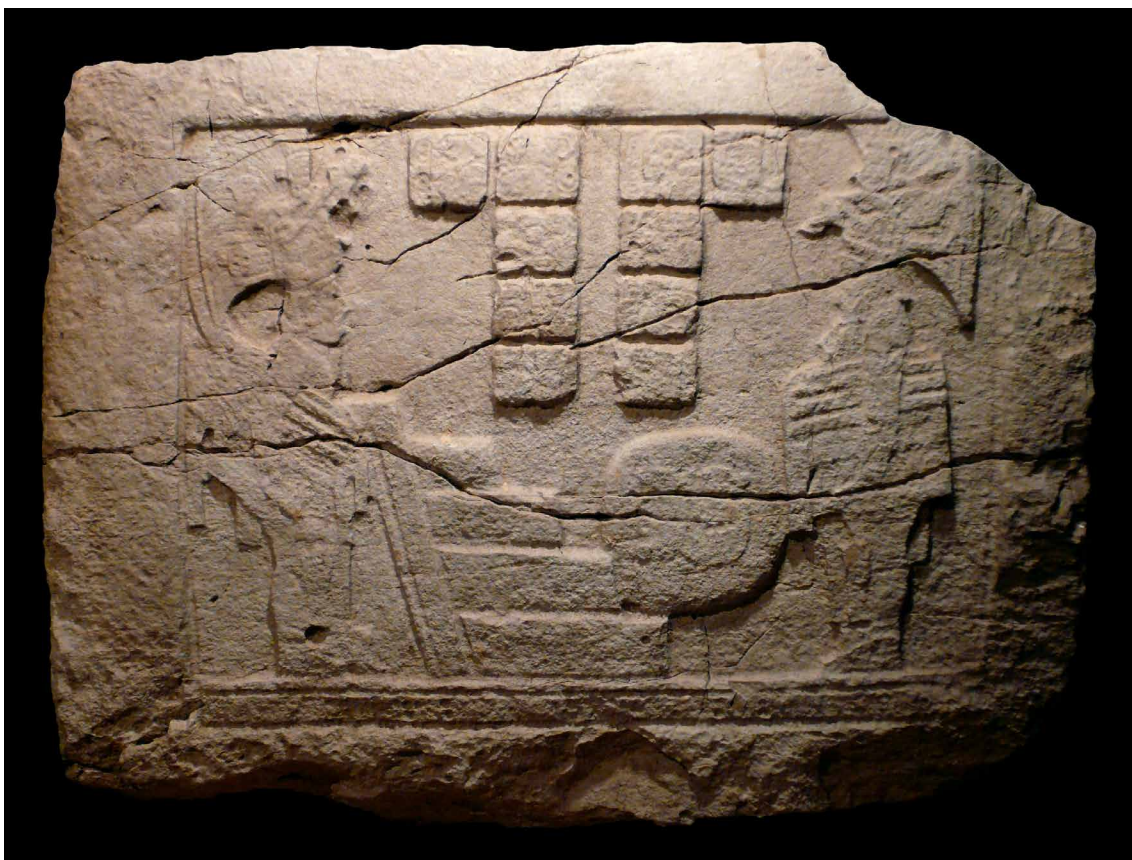


Figure 1. The ballplayer panel (photograph by Raphael Tunesi).

two different teams. The left opponent wears headgear similar to helmets seen in Maya iconography. A stylized *chapaht* (centipede) appears above a large *ajaw* sign. Three more *ajaw* signs can be found between the quetzal feathers. This element evokes one of the patron gods of the Maya ballgame; the player seems to be impersonating the sun god Huk Chapaht Tzik'in K'inich Ajaw. This deity is also mentioned in a ballgame context on Step VIII of Yaxchilan's Temple 33.

The figure on the right wears the head of a deer as his main headdress element. We can also discern a small *ajaw* sign with flames. This iconography may relate him to the patron of deers and the other animals of the forest called Huk Te' Ajaw. The division into separate teams on the basis of these gods seems very telling, since Huk Chapaht Tzik'in K'inich Ajaw, being the sun god, is naturally associated with the heavens, while Huk Te' Ajaw is an earthly god. Clearly this game must have been a reenactment of great mythological import.¹

Despite the richness of material dealing with the ballgame and its patron gods, it remains difficult to interpret this crucial part of Maya public life and to attribute a

clear value to the choice of each player's costume. It is hard to tell if there was some significant difference between the two gods or if this can tell us something about the outcome of the match. What is evident is that this ballgame elevated the two kings into divine context and that it was meaningful for political and religious purposes.

The Text

To start with the glyph on the rubber ball (Figure 3), this

¹ It is well known from other texts, especially on ceramics, that kings personified gods in public rituals such as dances and the ballgame. The glyphic expression for this ritual personification was *u baahil aan* which may be translated as "it is the image of his disguise." On one ceramic vessel (K1383 in Justin Kerr's database at www.famsi.org) we read:

u baahil aan Huk Te' Ajaw ti lajcha' nahb Tzakaj K'awiil
 "it is the image of his disguise as Huk Te' Ajaw at the twelve
 handspan [ball] of Tzakaj K'awiil"

This text probably describes a ballplayer's costume not dissimilar to our monument.

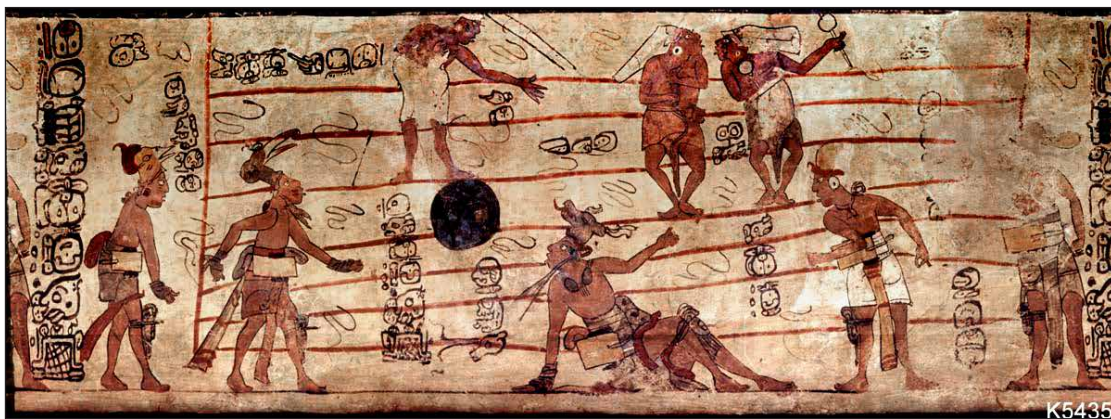
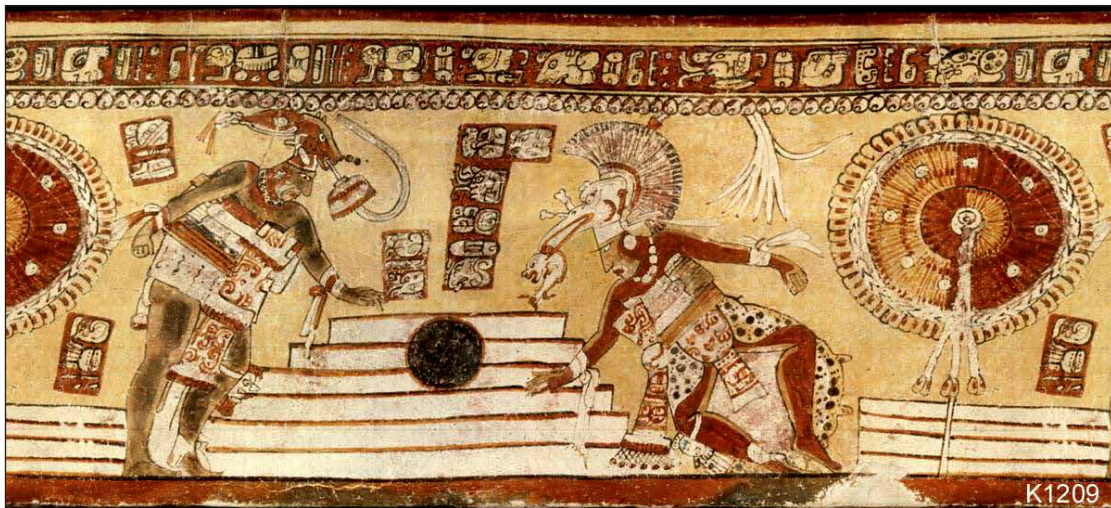


Figure 2. The ceramic vessels designated K1209 and K5435 in Justin Kerr's MayaVase database at www.famsi.org.

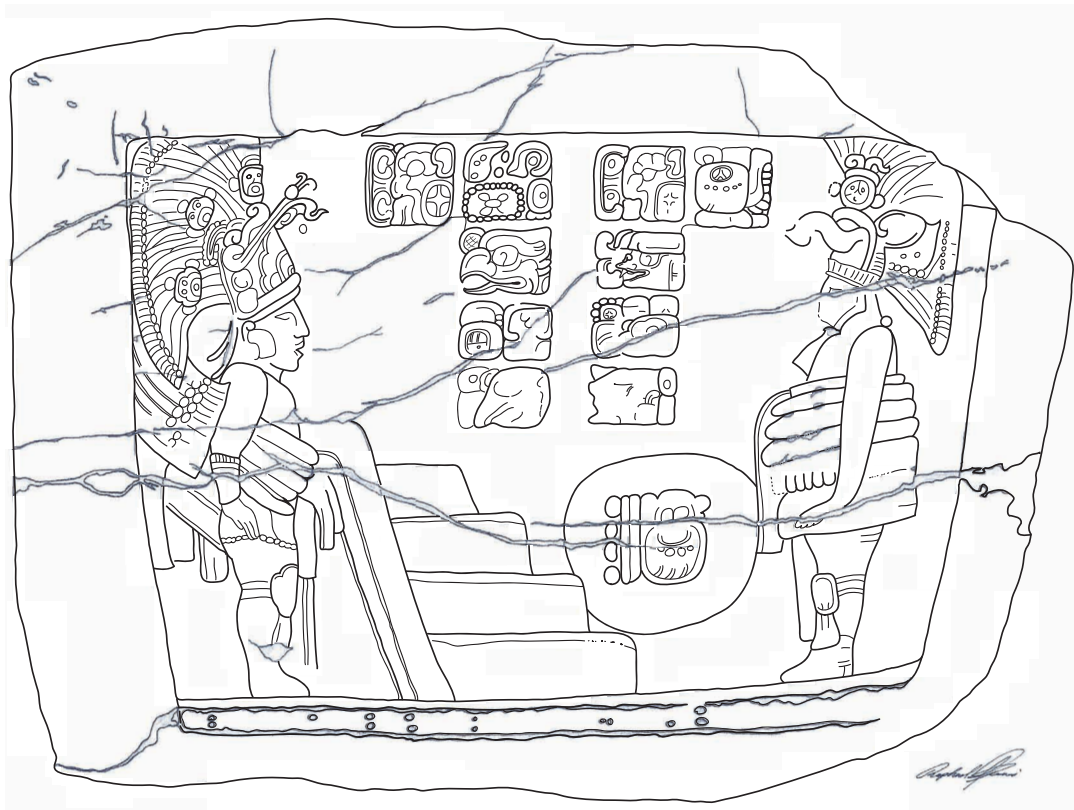


Figure 3. The ballplayer panel (drawing by Raphael Tunesi).

carries the expression:

14 na-ba
chanlajuun nahb
 "fourteen handspans"

This unit of measurement is still used in modern Ch'ol. *Ho'pe' nahb*, for example, means five handspans, or more or less 1.2 meters. Here this measurement indicates the size of the ball. Marc Zender (2004) has presented a calculation of the circumference and diameter of *ulama* balls using a measurement for the handspan of 21.53 cm. In this case the 14 *nahb* ball would have a circumference of 302.3 cm and a diameter of 96.2 cm.

Now let's have a look at the two short but telling texts that function as captions to the two players. We will first examine the caption of the player on the right since he will prove to be the most important individual in the scene.

The first text starts at C1, moving to the left to D1 and then down to C2, C3, and C4 (Figure 4):

U-BAAH wa-ma-wi K'AWIIL K'UHUL KANAL AJAW KALOOMTE'
u-baah Wamaaw K'awiil, K'uhul Kanal Ajaw, Kaloomte'
 "It is the image of Wamaaw K'awiil, the Holy Lord of Calakmul; he is the Kaloomte'."

When I first deciphered this name and then recog-

nized the emblem glyph of Calakmul, I must say that I was very surprised. The only previously known reference to this king is from distant Quirigua, as first noticed by Matthew Looper (1999) on Quirigua Stela I. And there, in the context of a ritual offering to the gods of Copan, the individual named as Wamaaw K'awiil carries, not the emblem glyph of Calakmul, but the title *Chiiknahb K'uhul Ajaw*. As *Chiiknahb* is a place name clearly associated with Calakmul (Stuart and Houston 1994; Martin

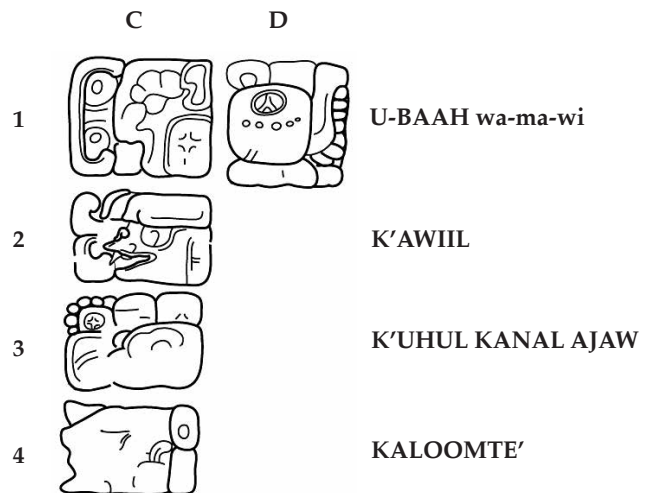


Figure 4. Caption text of the ballplayer on the right.

2005), this Wamaaw K'awiil was deemed to be a Calakmul ruler, who for some unexplained reason did not carry the emblem glyph of his kingdom. Due to the late style of our ballplayer monument, it is reasonable to assume that we are dealing with the same Calakmul ruler and not with a namesake.

At this point it is important to refer to the recent paper by Simon Martin entitled "Of Snakes and Bats: Shifting Identities at Calakmul" (Martin 2005). In this study he shows that Calakmul presents a complicated sequence of emblem glyphs unattested at other sites. Martin suggests that the dynasty represented by the Snake emblem glyph installed itself at Calakmul at the time of Yuhknoom the Great or his immediate predecessor. The few monuments at Calakmul that predate this king present a different emblem glyph, the Bat Head, and the lords of the Snake emblem glyph seem to acknowledge their recent arrival at Calakmul by using a special dynastic count based on Yuhknoom the Great. The last mention of the Snake emblem glyph at Calakmul can be found on the stelae of Wamaaw K'awiil's predecessor Yuhknoom Took' K'awiil; the next emblem glyph is a Bat Head in AD 751. Martin's analysis seems to show a "shifting" of the Snake emblem glyph from a first residence apparently at Dzibanche in the Early Classic (Velásquez 2004), first to Calakmul, and then exiled from Calakmul to some other region in the wake of Tikal's late seventh and early eighth century military victories.

It may be worthwhile to meditate on what caused the Quirigua scribes to use the Chiiknahb emblem glyph in their text and not, as in the present monument, the Snake. Quirigua Stela I was dedicated in 800, over sixty years after the event involving Wamaaw K'awiil. Perhaps by that time the Snake lineage was residing somewhere else, in a location unknown to us at the moment, and the use of the Snake glyph would have been ambiguous to contemporary readers. To avoid misunderstanding, the scribes used the Chiiknahb emblem glyph to refer directly to the Calakmul region where Wamaaw K'awiil was from. From this point of view, the title would

seem to be an ad hoc creation by Quirigua's artists: the toponym Chiiknahb was melded with the words *k'uhul ajaw* "holy lord," transforming it into an emblem glyph.² Use of this emblem glyph might have been intended to make the current political situation more explicit to the reader.

There is one last thing to mention about the Snake emblem glyph on our ballgame panel: the **K'UHUL** logograph (Figure 5). Normally only one part of it is visible and the other is "obscured" by the **ka** syllable. Here the watery element (dots) and the *k'an* cross of the **K'UHUL** glyph are conflated into one unique version.

The appearance of the kaloomte' title is interesting, but not really telling. Originally this title was the utmost for a Maya ruler and directly linked to the military power he represented, but during the course of the Classic Period it lost the exclusivity it once had. In any case, the fact that Wamaaw K'awiil is described as a kaloomte' may give us a sense of the importance attributed to him by at least one scribe.

The player on the left is probably the ruler of the site where the monument originally was located. His caption's reading order, which mirrors the shape and syntax of the first one, is A1, B1, B2, B3, B4 (Figure 6).

U-BAAH JANAAB TI' O' K'UHUL? ? ? a-AJAW

u-baah Janaab Ti' O', K'uhul? ? Ajaw

"It is his image, Janaab' Ti' O', (Holy) Lord of ?."

The first collocation of this short text is *u-baah* "it is his image." This expression is often found in captions describing the protagonist of a monument. Its root is the word *baah* "face," and its derived meaning is "image." The name of the lord is a conflation of the logogram for mouth, **TI'**, and the **JANAAB** flower. *Janaab* is also part of the name of the well known ruler of Palenque K'inich Janaab Pakal. A secure reading for the root *jan* or the complete lexeme *janaab* is still missing.

The second part of the name is a bird head. The absence of plumage in its mouth excludes the value **MU-WAAN**, while the feather markings lead to the reading of this glyph as **O'**, a mythical bird. What follows is the king's emblem glyph (Figure 7). Unfortunately its preservation precludes a clear identification of the different signs that compose it. We will discuss them one by one in the internal reading order of this single collocation. On the left side is a very eroded sign. Almost no details survive of its interior, but the remains of two dots can still be recognized on the right side. This may lead us to

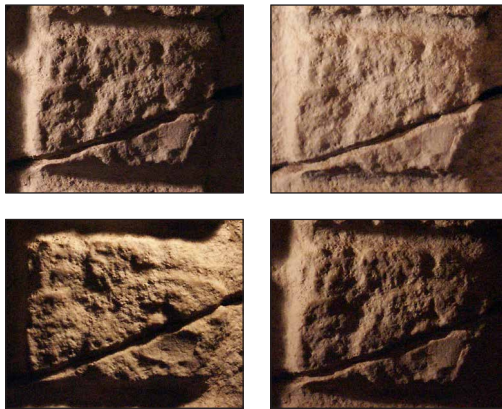


Figure 5. Emblem glyph of the ballplayer on the right (photographs by Joel Skidmore).

² It should be noted that there are two instances of Chiiknahb Ajaw (without *k'uhul*) attested at Calakmul (Martin 2005:10-11). One is on the Early Classic Stela 114, where the ruler depicted on the monument carries a Bat emblem glyph and acts as overlord to a Chiiknahb Ajaw (ibid.). The other, dating to the period when the Snake emblem glyph is no longer attested at Calakmul, appears on a hieroglyphic block from Structure 13 which accords Bolon K'awiil the Chiiknahb Ajaw title (Martin and Grube 2000:114).

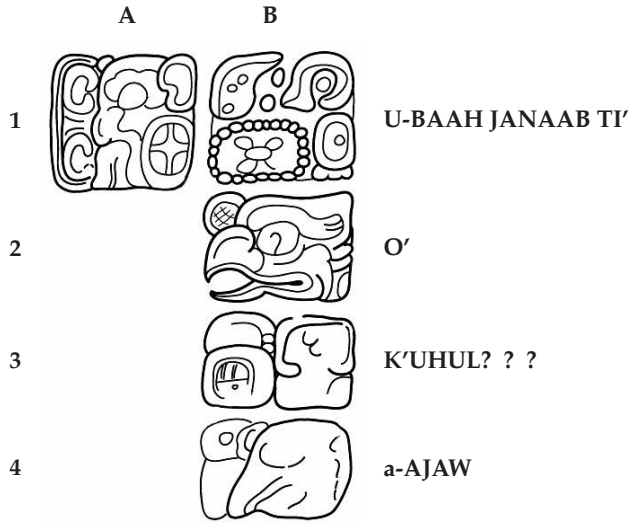


Figure 6. Caption text of the ballplayer on the left.

identify it tentatively as **K'UHUL** “holy.” The emblem glyph’s main signs are a round glyph strongly resembling a cartouche for Maya day signs followed by what might be the logogram **WITZ** “mountain.” The critical issue is that the details surviving in the inner part of the cartouche seem to correspond to the logogram for **HIX** “feline/jaguar.” There is indeed a polity with an emblem glyph that contains the sequence *hix witz*, but as we will see there is one problem with this identification.

Following the emblem glyph is the vulture head variant of the glyph **AJAW** “lord, king.” Together the text’s last two collocations seem to read [*K’uhul?*] *Hix Witz Ajaw*, “[Holy] Jaguar Hill Lord.” The problem mentioned above is that the Hix Witz emblem glyph never appears with the attachment *k’uhul*. The reasons for this are still unclear and may deal with mythology unknown

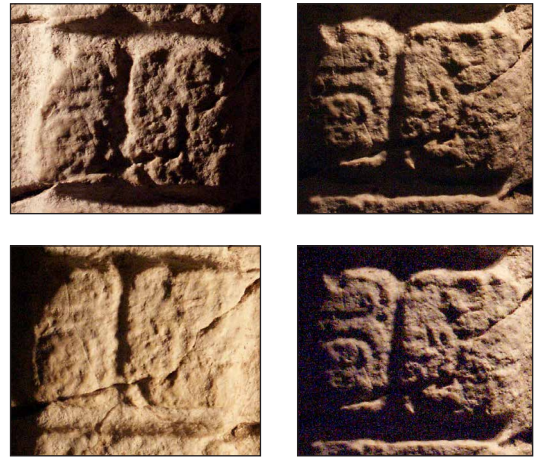


Figure 7. First half of the emblem glyph of the ballplayer on the left (photographs by Joel Skidmore).

to us, but some sites had a “full” emblem glyph, while others did not.

More or less contemporaneous with Wamaaw K'awiil a ruler of Hix Witz called Janaab Ti' O' appears in the corpus of Maya ceramics. Of the many examples, K1387 and K8665 (Figure 9) are the most impressive. The site of Hix Witz was located in western Peten, south of El Peru (Figure 8). The capital of this kingdom was probably El Pajara and/or Zapote Bobal, as recently proposed by David Stuart (2003).

If we assume for the moment that the Janaab Ti' O' on the new monument and the one of the ceramics are the same, we can approximate the period of his rulership between 736 and 744. We know that he was involved in the ballgame with Wamaaw K'awiil, who was in power for a short time around the year 736. The vase K8665 (Fig-



Figure 8. Hix Witz and the other Calakmul clients—La Corona, El Peru, and Dos Pilas—that confronted Tikal in a menacing half moon to the west. Precolumbia Mesoweb Maps.



Figure 9. The ceramic vessels designated K1387 and K8665 in Justin Kerr's MayaVase database at www.famsi.org.

ure 8) gives us the other date, the only known Calendar Round date of Janaab Ti' O' (Luis Lopes, personal communication 2006). This date is 13 Ajaw 8 Keh, which corresponds to 9.15.13.5.0 (September 22, 744).

The text that follows this Calendar Round deals with the painting of the vase and forms an appendix to its Primary Standard Sequence: "it is decorated / painted its surface." A mythological interpretation of this caption in association with the scene cannot be completely ruled out, but seems less probable. If we examine the iconography, we can see in the central part a plate with a mask. On the right side a deity impersonator dressed like God D holds a cut shell in one hand and in the other an aspergillum-like object for ritual cleansing. On his right we see a seated ruler who is probably the Hix Witz lord Janaab Ti' O' himself.

As expected he never carries the word *k'uhul* in his emblem glyph in all the ceramics attributed to him. Nevertheless, the fact that the names and the time period are exactly matching suggests more than simple coincidence.

There is, however, a cautionary precedent where a namesake of a Tikal ruler from Santa Elena appearing in the inscriptions of Palenque was misinterpreted as a reference to the Tikal king and almost changed the reconstruction of history (Schele and Mathews 1998; Martin 2003, citing personal communication with David Stuart). One explanation of the unorthodox usage of *k'uhul* could be that (as in the example of the Chiiknab K'uhul Ajaw emblem glyph seen above) this monument is retrospective, and/ or it was carved in Calakmul or a third location. Perhaps by adding *k'uhul* to the Hix Witz emblem glyph the scribe wanted to accord its ruler more importance, just as importance was taken away by eliminating *k'uhul* from individuals taken captive.

Whatever emblem glyph we see on this monument, it seems clear that its original home city managed to survive Tikal's war against Calakmul's former clients. This would explain the survival of this small monument depicting Wamaaw K'awiil, which probably would have been destroyed in the case of Tikal's conquest.

Wamaaw K'awiil: A revised perspective

If the political evolution of the Classic period was in large measure the struggle between two great powers, Tikal and the Snake dynasty, the dynamic trajectory of the latter was the era's salient feature (Martin and Grube 1995, 2000). For almost two hundred years the Snake kings were in the ascendant, lording over subordinates and conquering or sacking major kingdoms like Naranjo, Palenque, and Tikal itself (*ibid.*). Meanwhile the latter polity was subjected to a "dark age" lasting more than a century. The tables were finally turned by Jasaw Chan K'awiil's defeat of Snake king Yich'aak K'ahk' in 695, a reversal marked by an abrupt diminishment in foreign references to the Snake dynasty (Martin 1996). But Yich'aak K'ahk's successor, Yuknoom Took' K'awiil, still managed to hold sway over El Peru, Dos Pilas, and La Corona (Martin and Grube 2000:111; Martin 2005:12) (Figure 8).

Then came a second defeat for the Snake lords shortly before 736, after which there are but two foreign references to the Snake emblem, the one on this ballplayer panel and another at Seibal in 849 in the twilight of the Classic era (Martin 2005:12). The absence of Snake emblem glyphs at Calakmul itself after this second Tikal victory leads, as we have seen, to Martin's hypothesis that the Snake dynasty was exiled or effectively terminated (*ibid.*). In this context, what does it mean that Wamaaw K'awiil appears as an overlord on a monument from some point after 736 and that he carries a Snake emblem glyph? We already knew that he had involved himself in the affairs of distant Quirigua and even, judging by the date, had played some part in the Quirigua rebellion against Copan (Looper 1999; Martin and Grube 2000:114). And now we know that he was acknowledged as overlord by at least one other polity.

In the wake of the 695 defeat, the Snake lords had held on to at least three of the sites which, together with Hix Witz, had formed a great "axis" or half-moon menacing Tikal from the west (Martin and Grube 2000:111; Martin 2005:12) (Figure 8). While the apparent disappearance of the Snake emblem from Calakmul following the second defeat had suggested the possibility that such overlords were at an end, it is now clear that there was at least one polity still subject to the Snake dynasty, perhaps even one of the "axis."

Conclusion

Games like the one we see here were opportunities for building and strengthening alliances between Maya kingdoms. The monuments were of great political value to classical Maya dynasts. In this case we see a vassal lord playing with Calakmul's kaloomte'. We have similar and beautiful examples from La Corona from an earlier period that show local lords during ball games with rulers from Calakmul.

The scant data seem to lead to a new image of Wamaaw K'awiil's area of influence. Even if this picture is still vague and difficult to understand in its details, we

can argue that the defeat of Wamaaw K'awiil's predecessor, Yuknoom Took' K'awiil, was not quite so final as previously thought.

The impression we have at the moment is one characterized by two opposite factors: on the one hand Wamaaw K'awiil is involved in large-scale politics, while on the other we have reason to suspect that those were the very last ones undertaken by a Snake king.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank the collector of this very important monument for his permission to study and publish it. I also won't forget Luis Lopes whose comments about the article and insights about the corpus of Maya vases were of great importance. And finally a grateful thought goes to Simon Martin, Joel Skidmore, and Marc Zender for useful suggestions. Of course any mistakes are mine.

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