

## A NEW INSCRIBED WOODEN BOX FROM SOUTHERN MEXICO

By Armando Anaya H., Peter Mathews, and Stanley Guenter

Wooden objects from Classic Maya civilization are exceedingly rare. Perhaps the most famous are the magnificent lintels from Tikal. Many wooden objects were recovered from the Sacred Cenote at Chich'en Itza, and although most are from relatively late times, some objects date from the Classic period. In the western Maya region, two beautiful wooden objects have been reported. One is the carved wooden box from El Tortuguero (Coe 1974); the other is a carved figure of a seated dignitary (Ekholm 1964).

In June, 2001, while working at the archaeological site of Panhale, Tabasco, Dr. Armando Anaya Hernandez of La Trobe University, Australia, was informed of the presence of a wooden box in a nearby community. Anaya investigated further, and he and several companions visited the community and were shown the box. The group was also guided to a cave high up on a limestone cliff where the box was reportedly found along with human bones and ceramics. Unfortunately, as they were approaching the cave the group were attacked by African bees and forced to flee.

Anaya reported the existence of the box to Peter Mathews and Stanley Guenter, who were about to leave on a short trip to Mexico. In early August Mathews and Guenter, along with Joel Skidmore and Raphael Tunesi visited the community and were shown the box (which has also been seen by Nikolai Grube and three companions). The group took photographs and Mathews completed a drawing of the box. Mathews and Guenter gave a reading and translation to the community of the hieroglyphic text carved on the box. The community is justifiably proud of the artefact, and they most strongly consider it to be their community property.

The carved wooden box measures a maximum 29.1 cm in length and 7.1 cm in height. Its maximum surviving width is 9.5 cm, but one side of the box no longer survives: the original width would have been about 10.5 cm. The surviving piece of the box is the lower "body" of the box: it has four low supports carved on the bottom and a ridge along its top edge to receive a fitted lid. The surviving long side is carved with eleven columns of two glyphs each, and two large glyphs are carved on each of the narrow ends of the box. It is quite clear that originally there were more glyphs on the box, since the text on the surviving long side of the box begins in the middle of a sentence. (As we shall see, the two ends of the box appear to contain title glyphs that are meant to be read as labels rather than part of the running text.)

The reading order on the surviving long side can also be established from the surviving glyphs. Glyph pN1 is a form of Distance Number, leading from one date (recorded in the previous passage) forward to a new date: the new date should follow immediately. In this case the distance number is recorded as one of 6 days. At pM2 is a clear Tzolk'in date, and the next glyph, pN2 appears to be a haab' date, since it has a numeral coefficient. The following glyph, pO1, has a syllabic *ja* suffix, which is a common verbal suffix. Thus we have a plausible reading order pN1-pM2-pN2-pO1 in this segment of the text. This has several implications. First, the surviving long side must be read in pairs of columns pK-pL, pM-pN, pO-pP, pQ-pR, pS-pT, with a final single column pU completing the inscription. Second, it would appear that the lid of the box contained no glyphs on its long sides (at least not any that were to be read in sequence with the glyphs on the body of the box). On the basis of the reading sequence discussed above,

there seem to be only two rows of glyphs in this inscription. Third, we may speculate on the text on the other long side of the box. We know the inscription must have begun on the other side. This means in turn that we should expect an even number of glyph columns, and hence our reconstruction of columns pA-pJ in that part of the text. We have labelled the glyphs on the two narrow ends of the box pV-pW and pX-pY.

It is clear that there are no glyphs on the bottom of the box, and it also appears that no glyphs were carved on the sides of the lid. It is not known if the top of the lid was carved, but if the El Tortuguero wooden box is any indication, it probably was. We have already mentioned the 6-day distance number and the date to which it leads. Other highlights of the the surviving text include the presence of two glyphs that imply hierarchical relationships. One is in the first surviving passage, glyph pK1, and the other is at pT1 in the final passage. The first glyph, pK1, reads **yi-chi-NAL**, *yichnal*, "in the presence of", and is normally placed between the name of the local ruler and his overlord (or in some cases a god). The second glyph, pT1, reads **u-KAB'-ji-ya**, *u kab'jiy*, "he supervised it", and also normally has the name of the local lord in front and is followed by the name of the overlord. In other words, we can expect to see, following both of these expressions, the name of a very important superordinate lord.

This expectation is enhanced by two other expressions present in the inscription of the box. First, the two shorter sides of the box both appear to record the title **OCH-K'IN-ni KALOOM-TE'**, *Ochk'in Kaloomte'*, or "West Kaloomte'". *Kaloomte'* is the highest personal title currently identified in Maya historical texts, and is a clear reference to a high king. The *kaloomte'* title is one of the so-called "directional" titles, because it is often preceded by a glyph indicating one of the cardinal directions: in this case, "west". The second indication that the text of this box refers to very powerful individuals is in the glyphs at pL2-pM1. These read **WITE'-NAAH AJAW**. *Wite'naah* is a reference in Maya texts to Teotihuacan (Stuart 2000), and *ajaw* is the Maya word for "lord". Together, the two glyphs can probably be translated "Teotihuacan lord". It is now well attested that Teotihuacan had a major influence over the politics and culture of the Maya area from the late 4th to the middle 6th centuries, A.D.

Who was this Teotihuacan lord? His name is found twice in the surviving text of the box. In the first reference, his name comprises two glyphs: pL1-pK2. The glyph at pL1 seems to be the same as that at pU1, one of the glyphs following the *u kab'jiy* expression. In both cases the glyph seems to read **ta-jo[mo]**. The following glyph at pK2 reads **u-?-HAAB'-?**. A nearly identical name occurs on Panel 2 of the nearby site of Piedras Negras, where it reads **ta-[jo]-mo u-k'a-b'a-TUUN-ni**, *Tajom U K'ab' Tuun*. (*K'ab'* is a Maya word for "hand"; it is quite likely that the weathered superfix of glyph L2 was a hand sign.)

It should be noted that in the western Maya lowlands the T548 **HAAB'** sign is known to be regularly replaced by the T528 **TUUN** sign. A recent text recovered from Comalcalco, in fact, records the T548 **HAAB'** sign with a T89 **tu** prefix (Armijo Torres, Gallegos Gomora, and Zender 2000, Fig. 6). The glyphs that follow the name on Piedras Negras Panel 2 are **OCH-K'IN-ni KALOOMTE'**, precisely the high title that we have seen is carved on the two narrow ends of the wooden box. In combination with the title of *Wite'naah Ajaw*, it may be suggested that this lord on the wooden box is none other than the same *Tajom U Kab' Tuun* named at Piedras Negras.

The Piedras Negras Panel 2 event involves the taking of a *ko'haw* helmet by the Piedras Negras king Turtle Tooth; he does this *yichnal*, "in the presence of" *Tajom U K'ab' Tuun*, the *Ochk'in Kaloomte'*. The *ko'haw* helmet is a military helmet with strong Teotihuacan connections. The Piedras Negras passage apparently refers to the ceremony in which this important Teotihuacan military emblem was taken by the Piedras Negras king as a representative of Teotihuacan power. At Piedras Negras, Teotihuacan is not specifically mentioned: it is only the wooden box

inscription that tells us of Tajom U K'ab' Tuun's origins. The date of the passage on Piedras Negras Panel 2 is 9.3.16.0.5 8 Chikchan 3 Keh (11 November, 510). It is significant that 6 days later would reach the date 9.3.16.0.11 1 Chuwen 9 Keh (17 November, 510). Although the day and month names of the date on the wooden box are weathered, the day coefficient is 1 and the month coefficient is between 6 and 9. In other words, there is a good possibility that the date of the first passage of the wooden box was the same as that recorded on Piedras Negras Panel 2, and that the second date was just six days later.

We are not sure of the significance of the verb of the second passage, so the nature of the event is unclear. In addition, the name of the protagonist—the subordinate of the Teotihuacan lord—is not clear. From the foregoing discussion, we argue that the text revolves around a Teotihuacan lord who incorporated Piedras Negras into his hegemonic realm in the early 6th century, A.D., apparently making alliances with local dignitaries and/or dispensing military and political charters to them. Based on the style of the glyphs on the box, however, we would estimate that it was probably carved in the eighth century, A.D. In other words, the box appears to have been carved some 200-250 years after the events it talks about. It is likely to have been carved at the behest of a local dignitary who was a descendent of the A.D. 510 protagonist, and who wished to commemorate what was probably the most important event in the history of his family: a royal audience with a lord of Teotihuacan.

## References

Armijo Torres, Ricardo, Miriam Judith Gallegos Gomora, and Marc Uwe Zender 2000 Urnas funerarias, textos historicos y ofrendas en Comalcalco. *Los Investigadores de la Cultura Maya*, 8(2):312-323. Campeche: Universidad Autonoma de Campeche.

Coe, Michael D. 1974 A Carved Wooden Box from the Classic Maya Civilization. *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque, Part II*, (Merle Greene Robertson, ed.):51-58. Pebble Beach, Calif. The Robert Louis Stevenson School.

Ekholm, Gordon F. 1964 A Maya Sculpture in Wood. *The Museum of Primitive Art Studies 4*. New York: Museum of Primitive Art.

Stuart, David 2000 "The Arrival of Strangers": Teotihuacan and Tollan in Classic Maya History, in: *Mesoamerica's Classic Heritage* (David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones, and Scott Sessions, eds.):465-513. Boulder, Colorado: The University Press of Colorado.