



The Hieroglyphic Stairway at El Reinado, Guatemala

DAVID STUART

University of Texas at Austin



Figure 1. Location of El Reinado and the other sites referenced in the text. The twin bodies of water between El Reinado and Zapote Bobal are the Laguna San Diego (on the left) and the Laguna La Gloria. Map courtesy of Precolumbia Mesoweb Press.

The ruins of El Reinado are located in the western Peten of Guatemala, some 36 kilometers west of the modern town of La Libertad and approximately 9 kilometers south-southwest of Laguna San Diego (Figure 1). El Reinado was surveyed and reported by Mejía and Leporte (2004), who describe a small Classic Maya center with a main acropolis, a large plaza on its eastern side, and a causeway running

southward toward a small hilltop complex (Figure 2). Most notably, Mejía and Laporte also reported the remains of a hieroglyphic stairway at the plaza level of the principal structure or acropolis. Several limestone blocks of the stairway had their faces sawn away by looters, and the weathered stones that remained were carved with many small, eroded hieroglyphs (Figure 3). Despite its

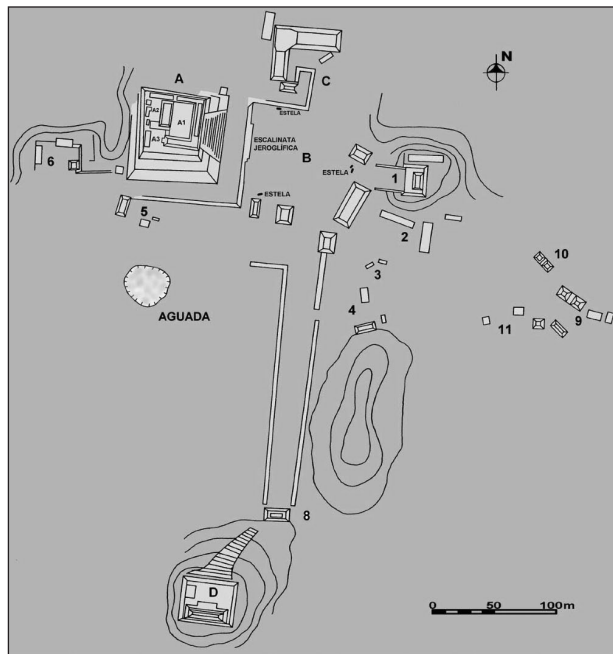


Figure 2. Map of the ruins of El Reinado, Guatemala (after Mejía and Laporte 2004).



Figure 3. Inscribed block photographed at El Reinado (from Mejía and Laporte 2004).

unfortunate condition, the El Reinado hieroglyphic stairway must once have displayed one of the longer inscriptions of the ancient Peten region.

Upon reading the report by Mejía and Laporte, I was immediately struck by the strong resemblance of the eroded stairway blocks to three sawn glyphic panels now stored at the Museo Sylvanus Morley at the Parque Nacional Tikal, first recorded and published by Karl Herbert Meyer (Meyer 1991:33-34). In 2006 I had the opportunity to inspect these inscriptions firsthand, and I left with very little doubt that the stones were originally part of the El Reinado hieroglyphic stairway (hereafter Hieroglyphic Stairway 1, or HS 1). In this essay I would like to present an analysis of the fragmentary inscription of HS 1, describing some aspects of the history it contains and how it relates to texts and historical information at nearby sites.

Hieroglyphic Stairway 1

Mejía and Laporte discovered seventeen blocks of the stairway, five with their faces sawn away by looters. The rest were weathered, yet the published photographs show some stones with legible details of potential epigraphic importance. It is hoped that these remains can be properly documented and assessed at some point in the not too distant future.

The three sawn portions from HS 1 are here designated as blocks A, B, and C (Figures 4-6). Obviously these must correspond to three of the five sawn “carcasses” left at El Reinado (the location of the remaining two is unknown). None of the three seem to be contiguous portions of the larger inscription, so I will discuss them here as isolated portions of the longer text, emphasizing that their letter designations are provisional and have no bearing on their relative placement within the original stairway.

Block A

Block A presents a fairly well-preserved inscription in two columns and with borders on all sides (Figure 4). The right edge of the stone just shows another panel of glyphs, conforming to the overall format we see on all three stones: inscriptions of double columns separated by a narrow borders of about 3 cm in width.

The first two glyphs of the panel, pA1 and pB1,

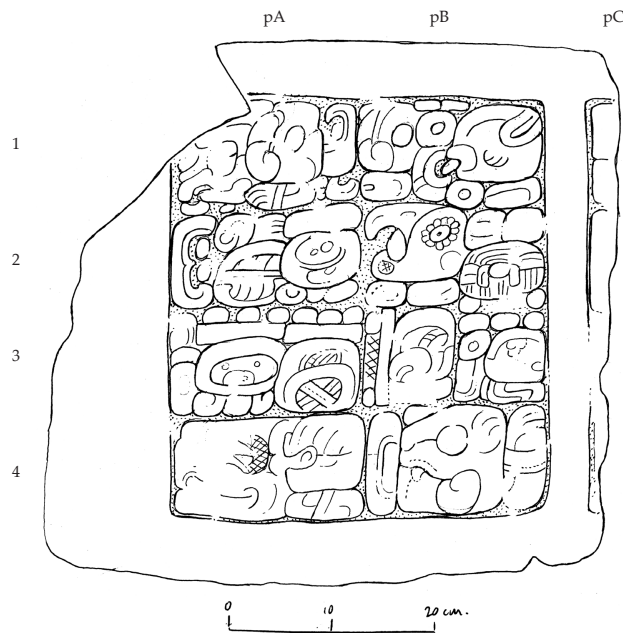


Figure 4. Block A of the three looted stairway blocks now in the Tikal bodega, probably from the El Reinado hieroglyphic stairway. Preliminary drawing by David Stuart.

each contain verbal expressions. I interpret this pattern as a juxtaposition of two events separated in time by a haab expression given in the very first part of pA1, although the number in the haab is missing. The earlier of the two events is birth (**SIH-ji-ya**), the latter is arrival (**hu-li**) (“*n* years after he was born, then he arrived...”). We might expect the grouping of signs after **hu-li** in pB1 to be the personal name of the arrival subject, yet based on examples we will soon discuss, I believe this to be the place glyph for El Reinado. It appears in several other texts where it clearly has a toponymic function, and we will discuss this more fully below. The featured event of Block A therefore seems to be the arrival of a certain individual at El Reinado.

The subject of the phrase is named with a familiar title at pA2 and pB2: “the guardian of Torch Macaw, the Mutul Lord.” This can only be Bahlaj Chan K’awiil, the ruler of Dos Pilas, who regularly takes both titles in the inscriptions of Dos Pilas. Bahlaj Chan K’awiil, the founding dynast of Dos Pilas, was born in the year 625. His accession date is ambiguous, but his reign was long and eventful, lasting until his presumed death around 698, when he was 73 years old.¹ There can be little doubt, then, that this refers to the visit of the Dos Pilas lord Bahlaj Chan K’awiil

to El Reinado.

The date for this episode appears in the next glyph: “on 8 Ahaw 8 Woh.” This is almost certainly the K’atun ending 9.13.0.0.0 which occurred in 692, just six years before Bahlaj Chan K’awiil’s presumed death. After the date we find a sequence of glyphs that is difficult to analyze, most especially **AJ-ta-?** at pB3a. But the accompanying glyph **3-TE’-TUUN-ni** is very clear as one of the principal place names of Calakmul, Uxte’tuun.

It would seem that the stairway’s 9.13.0.0.0 record therefore bears some connection to Calakmul. To understand this we should take a moment to consider the wider historical context of the time. 9.13.0.0.0 was a K’atun ending of special importance in Maya ritual history, and it was widely celebrated in a number of ancient centers of the Maya lowlands. Curiously, however, we find no record of it at Dos Pilas. Its only mention in the entire Petexbatun region comes from Aguateca Stela 5 (Figure 5), where K’awiil Chan K’inich (Ruler 4) records his own Period Ending rite on 9.16.5.0.0 and, for reasons obscure, connects his ritual celebration with the far earlier scattering and dance by Bahlaj Chan K’awiil over sixty years previously, on 9.13.0.0.0 8 Ahaw 8 Woh.

Although the arrival episode on Block A is featured in connection with Bahlaj Chan K’awiil and the 8 Ahaw 8 Woh date, I would hesitate to interpret this as evidence that the Dos Pilas ruler celebrated the K’atun at the small, distant site of El Reinado. Rather, I suspect that his visit was to be understood as somehow occurring *in connection* with 9.13.0.0.0.

An important clue in this interpretation is the presence of the Calakmul toponym. The Calakmul ruler at the time, Yuknoom Yich’aak K’ahk’, oversaw the 9.13.0.0.0 K’atun, as recorded on La Corona Stela 1 and indicated by the unusual title “13 K’atun lord” on the recently unearthed HS 2 from La Corona (Stuart 2012). On La Corona’s Stela 1 we read that the local ruler of the time, Chak Ak’ach Yuk, witnessed the same K’atun ending, presumably at Calakmul itself. Might it be that other key allies of Yuknoom Yich’aak

¹ Various sources for this ruler’s reign include Houston and Mathews 1984; Houston 1993; Martin and Grube 2000; Guenter 2003; Zender 2010.

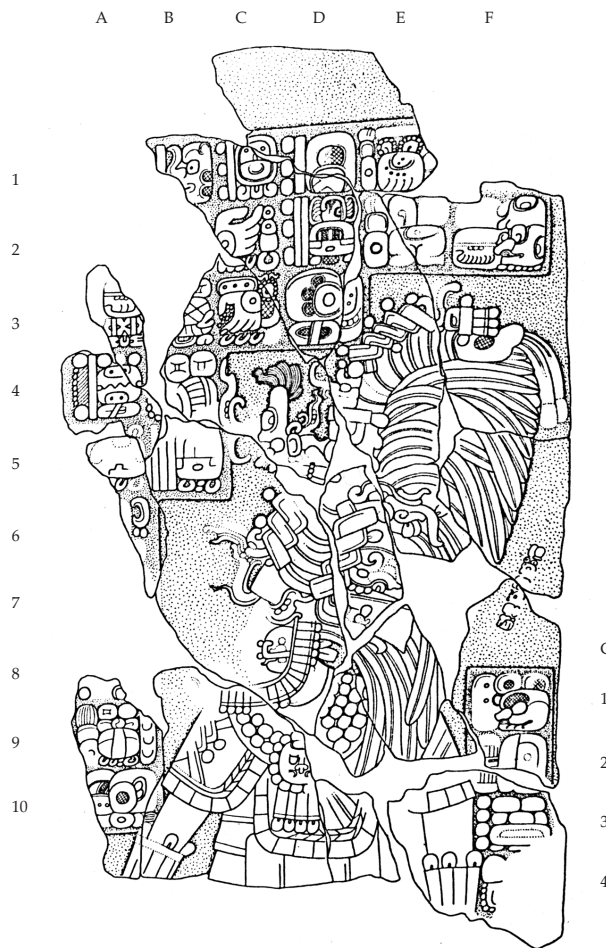


Figure 5. Aguateca Stela 5 (drawing by Ian Graham).

K'ahk' journeyed to Calakmul for the same K'atun ending? The inscription at El Reinado makes no explicit record of this, but I suspect that the mention of Bahlaj Chan K'awiil's visit may been part of a longer journey, perhaps a stop-over on his way northward to attend his overlord's K'atun ritual at Uxte'tuun.

All this being said, I should point out a possible complication with this assessment of the text. The birth record near the very beginning of block A's inscription seems to follow an incomplete DN of ? Tuns (pA1a), linking the birth to the arrival event. The sense of the phrase looks straightforward as "it was *n* years and *n* days after he was born, then he arrives..." The subject of the birth is here omitted, but it is not unusual that the unspecified subject of an earlier event is understood to be the same as the subject of a later, more emphasized event with

which it is juxtaposed. If we assume these subjects to be the same, then, we have a record of Bahlaj Chan K'awiil's visit coming less than twenty years after his own birth. The problem with this interpretation is simple: the K'atun ending 9.13.0.0.0 does not fit this scenario at all. The Dos Pilas king was born on 9.9.12.11.2 8 Ik' 5 Keh, in 625, nearly seventy years before the K'atun celebration. So there are two solutions to consider: (1) the subject of the birth is someone else altogether, named in an earlier passage now missing, or (2) the Calendar Round 8 Ahaw 8 Woh does not refer to the K'atun ending but instead to an earlier station, perhaps 9.10.7.5.0. Neither option is too terribly attractive. Given the consistent manner in which events are juxtaposed in most Maya rhetorical structure (see Josserand 1995), I do have difficulty seeing two personal subjects for these linked events. The timing of the earlier Long Count placement for 8 Ahaw 8 Woh might work, for it comes only about 14 years after the birth of Bahlaj Chan K'awiil—a span that the damaged Distance Number on the El Reinado block could accommodate:

9. 9.12.11. 2	8 Ik' 5 Keh
<u>14.11.18</u>	
9.10. 7. 5. 0	8 Ahaw 8 Woh

This is all highly speculative, of course, and making a case that 8 Ahaw 8 Woh is anything but 9.13.0.0.0 feels somewhat forced, admittedly. These questions and ambiguities should remain open to discussion until more pieces of the inscription can be investigated.

The remaining glyphs at the bottom of Block A include a verb for "witness" (**i-IL-ji**), using a rare head variant of *i* (the vulture plucking the dog's eye). This is followed by a name similar to **CHAK-BOLAY?-TOOK'?**, a possible supernatural who appears elsewhere on the El Reinado step inscription, as we will see momentarily, as well as in the painted texts of Najtunich cave.

Block B

This second portion of the stairway inscription contains a few personal names of rulers or deities, but it is a bit eroded and difficult to analyze as part of a meaningful narrative. Among the sequence of

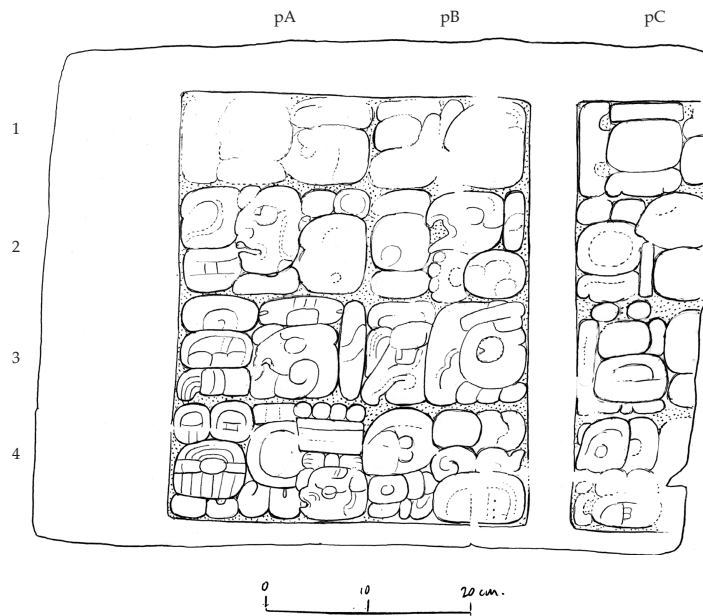


Figure 6. Block B of the three looted stairway blocks now in the Tikal bodega, probably from the El Reinado hieroglyphic stairway. Preliminary drawing by David Stuart.

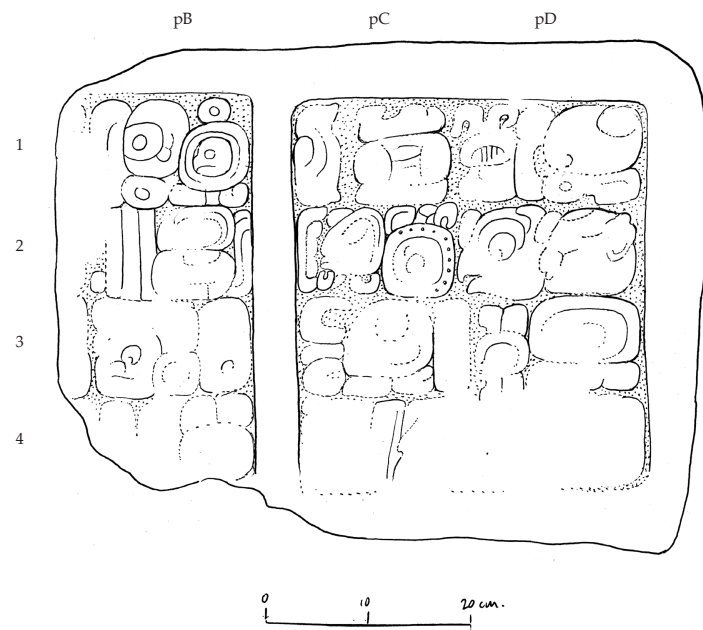


Figure 7. Block C of the three looted stairway blocks now in the Tikal bodega, probably from the El Reinado hieroglyphic stairway. Preliminary drawing by David Stuart.

elements are a female name, perhaps as part of a parentage statement (pB1-pA2: **ya-AL-IX jo-po-K'IN-ni-?-IXIK?**) (Figure 6). At pA3 we see the name of the same **CHAK-BOLAY?-TOOK'** just encountered on Block A. This comes before **U-MAM** (*u mam*, "his grandfather, grandson") at pB3a, and then what may be a name of a Tikal or Dos Pilas lord at pB3b, as indicated by the clear emblem title at pA4a. Again, there is very little to go on in terms of reconstructing historical details.

A calendar round date 5 ? 19 Mak comes after the emblem at the bottom of column pA, but it is impossible to place with any certainty. The next glyph (pB4) is **u-ti-ya OCH-K'AHK'**, *uhtiiy ochk'ahk'*, "the fire-entering happened," referring to an architectural dedication ritual.

Block C

The third looted panel from the El Reinado steps is more eroded than Blocks A and B, yet enough remains to show that its text likewise refers to the wider political world of the central lowlands (Figure 7).

The column at the left (pB) is largely eroded, although it contained at least one Calendar Round date, now illegible. At the top of the surviving two columns (pC1 and pD1) we have what looks to be a record of a scattering event, spelled in unconventional fashion as **U-cho-ko-wa K'AHK'**, *u chok-ow k'ahk'*, "he casts (into?) the fire." This is then followed by another example of the El Reinado toponym, which we will discuss in more detail below. One would reasonably suspect that this ceremony took place in association with a missing Period Ending recorded in the previous column, and it is just possible that the tzolk'in position given at pB1b is a part of this, in which case 9.13.5.0.0 1 Ahaw 3 Pop seems the most likely possibility.

The protagonist of the scattering rite is named at pC2b and pD2a, and is a familiar character from this region and time period in Maya history. The

name reads **JANAB-TI' O'**, for Janab Ti' O', the noted Late Classic ruler of the Hixwitz polity (Martin and Reents Budet 2010; Fitzsimmons, in press) that some years ago I assigned to the ruins Pajal and Zapote Bobal, located just a short distance to the north of El Reinado (Stuart 2003). The eroded jaguar-looking element after his name, at pD2, seems to wear an **AJAW** headscarf, and may therefore be a version of the title *Hixwitz Ajaw*, "the Jaguar Hill Lord."

The El Reinado Place Glyph

On Blocks A and C we encountered a distinctive looking glyph that I posited as a likely place glyph of El Reinado (Figure 8a). Importantly, one example seems to occur on one of the discarded stairway blocks published by Mejía and Laporte (Figure 8b), lending good support to the identification of the Tikal fragments as being parts of the El Reinado steps. It also occurs on another inscribed block from El Reinado that was published by Mejía and Laporte (Figure 9), perhaps a bench fragment or other piece of architectural sculpture, where we see it in combination with **AJAW**, before a probable local emblem glyph (**wi-ku?-NAL-la?**) (see Mejía and LaPorte 2004:203).² Interestingly, the same title appears also on two inscribed obsidian blades from Yaxchilan, perhaps naming a lord from El Reinado (Figure 10).

It is not easy to decipher the entire place glyph, although it looks to be composed of the sequence **ch'a?-wa?-lu?-TE'**. The common **lu** syllable might here be better seen as the logogram **JUL**, used elsewhere to write the transitive verb root *jul*, "to spear something."³ The combination **JUL-TE'** in the place name may make more sense, actually, given that *julte'* is an attested word for "spear" or "dart," (*hulte'* in Yukatek) which seems a likely reading here, but I have no interpretation to offer



Figure 8. Possible place glyph of El Reinado: (a) glyph pB1 of Block A (see Figure 4; preliminary drawing by David Stuart); glyph at extreme lower left of inscribed block photographed by Mejía and Laporte at El Reinado; (see Figure 3; from Mejía and Laporte 2004).

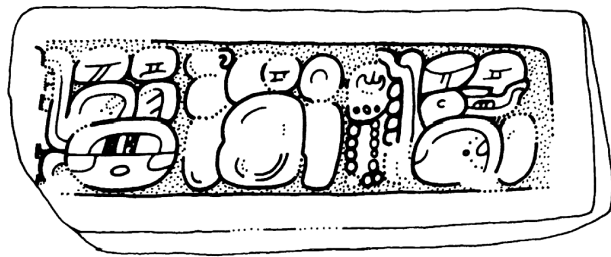


Figure 9. Inscribed block from El Reinado's acropolis. Drawing by Alfonso Lacadena (from Mejía and Laporte 2004).

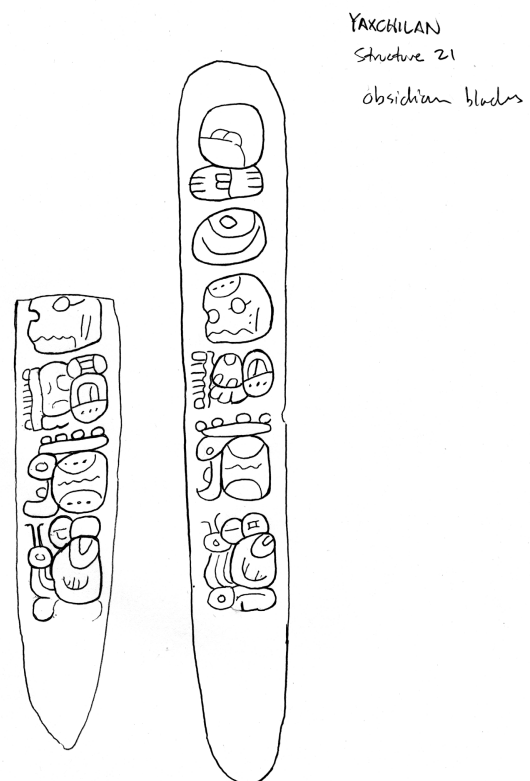


Figure 10. Two inscribed obsidian blades, excavated from Structure 21 at Yaxchilan. Drawings by David Stuart.

² In Mejía and Laporte's presentation of the block with three hieroglyphs (we can designate it El Reinado Miscellaneous 1), the initial sign of the emblem glyph is read as **ni**, in the sequence **ni-TUUN-NAL-la**. This led them to posit the ancient name of El Reinado as *Ni'tuunaal*. However, the initial sign of the emblem is surely **wi**, and a full reading seems elusive at this point. It is difficult to know just what the nature of this unique emblem glyph is without further examples. For now I suggest that the **ch'a-wa?-JUL?-TE'** toponym is a local place name, and that the emblem shown on the block is more of a courtly designation.

³ I believe a graphic distinction may be involved in the **lu** and **JUL** signs, despite some general similarity. The **JUL** logogram usually shows a spear-like element piercing the **lu** syllable—a key detail which is not always visible on the El Reinado place glyph, but seems clear on the Block A example (Figure 8a). The speared sign resembling **lu** within the **JUL** logogram may be motivated by the word *lu'* for "catfish."

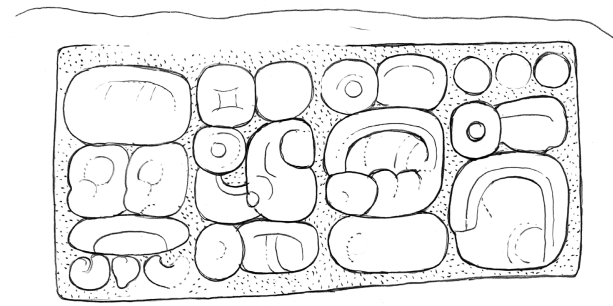


Figure 11. Inscribed block from Itzan, Hieroglyphic Stairway 1. Preliminary drawing by David Stuart, from a field photograph by Ian Graham.

for the two initial signs.

One interesting instance of the El Reinado place glyph comes from the ruins of Itzan, located near the Río Pasión to the south. On Hieroglyphic Stairway 1 of that site we find it used again with **AJAW**, in a short sequence of glyphs (Figure 11). Before this is likely a verb, of unknown meaning. (**i-?-li-ya**). The final two glyphs may incorporate a second verbal expression (possibly **PAT?-?**) before **3-TE'-TUUN**, a clear reference to Uxte'tuun, a Calakmul placename. This is an interesting if somewhat enigmatic juxtaposition, reminiscent of the pairing of the same two place names on Block A of the El Reinado text.

Conclusions

Hieroglyphic Stairway 1 from El Reinado is a very damaged and incomplete monument, but it evidently once contained a great deal of interesting historical information on various dynasties of the Late Classic. We can now add El Reinado to the list of centers in the Peten that participated in a rather complex network of political connections. It was apparently important enough to warrant a visit by one of the major kings of Peten history, Bahlaj Chan K'awiil of Dos Pilas, and its rulers are mentioned in texts found at the nearby centers of Itzan and Yaxchilan. Intriguing as well is its apparent connection to Calakmul, which remains very poorly understood. El Reinado's location between the Río Pasión region and the kingdoms of Hixwitz may indicate that it was a geopolitical "bridge" of sorts in the alliance networks of the great Calakmul ruler Yuknoom Ch'een, probably named on one of the stairway blocks.

Further archaeological work at El Reinado will be necessary one day in order to clarify these larger regional connections, and hopefully this can take place in the near future. It is difficult to overstate, too, how important it will be to further investigate and document the remains of the inscription on

Hieroglyphic Stairway 1, which evidently once displayed one of the longer texts of the Late Classic Peten region.

References

- Fitzsimmons, James
In press Janab Ti' O' and the Transformation of Zapotec Bobal, Guatemala. *Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing* 63. Mesoamerica Center, Department of Art and Art History, University of Texas at Austin.
- Gunter, Stanley
2003 The Inscriptions of Dos Pilas Associated with B'ajlaj Chan K'awiil. *Mesoweb*: www.mesoweb.com/features/gunter/DosPilas.html.
- Houston, Stephen D.
1993 *Hieroglyphs and History at Dos Pilas*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Houston, Stephen D., and Peter Mathews
1984 *The Dynastic Sequence of Dos Pilas, Guatemala*. Monograph 1. Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute, San Francisco. Available: www.mesoweb.com/pari/publications/monographs/01/Monograph1-print.pdf.
- Josserand, J. Kathryn
1995 Participant Tracking in Maya Hieroglyphic Texts: Who Was that Masked Man? *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 5(1):65-89.
- Martin, Simon, and Nikolai Grube
2000 *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya*. Thames and Hudson, London.
- Martin, Simon, and Dorie Reents-Budet
2010 A Hieroglyphic Block from the Region of Hiix Witz, Guatemala. *The PARI Journal* 11(1):1-6. Available: www.mesoweb.com/pari/publications/journal/1101/index.html.
- Mejía, Héctor E., and Juan Pedro Laporte
2004 Exploración en El Reinado (*Ni'tuunal*), La Libertad, Petén: la Acrópolis y la Plaza A. In *Reconocimientos y excavaciones arqueológicas en los municipios de La Libertad, Dolores, y Poptun, Petén*. Atlas Arqueológico de Guatemala, Reporte 18(10). IDAEH, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, Guatemala. Available: www.atlasarqueologico.com/reportes.php?idr=11.
- Stuart, David
2003 La identificación de Hixwitz. Paper presented at the XV Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala.
2012 Notes on a New Text from La Corona. *Maya Decipherment*: decipherment.wordpress.com/2012/06/30/notes-on-a-new-text-from-la-corona/.
- Zender, Marc
2010 The Music of Shells. In *Fiery Pool: The Maya and the Mythic Sea*, edited by Daniel Finamore and Stephen D. Houston, pp. 83-85. Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA.