



# Some Working Notes on the Text of Tikal Stela 31

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The long inscription on the back of Stela 31, dedicated in AD 445, is the single most important historical text from Tikal (Figure 1, Appendix 2). The ruler Siyaj Chan K'awiil dedicated the monument on the period ending 9.0.10.0.0, and in its text presented a far-reaching look at Tikal's early political history, leading up to his own rule in the fifth century. The inscription has been the subject of several earlier studies (Schele 1976; Jones and Satterthwaite 1982; Grube and Martin 2000; Stuart 2000), yet numerous aspects of the inscription still remain murky, and certain key historical and ritual events remain poorly understood. The discursive structure of the text is also unusual or ambiguous in places, partially due to missing areas in the lower section of the stela, creating a few inevitable gaps in the reconstruction of the text's larger narrative.

The present essay is in no way a comprehensive treatment of Stela 31's challenging inscription; rather, it focuses on the reading and analysis of several interesting passages, fleshing out earlier ideas and analyses and no doubt raising a few more questions in the process. Many of the ideas presented here are rough and preliminary in nature, but I hope they can foster some future discussions and epigraphic research.

## The Opening Passage

When viewed overall, the inscription on Stela 31 can be parsed into three thematic sections. The first part, from the opening date through block C17, highlights an important Period Ending when the monument was dedicated and goes on to juxtapose the king's ceremonies of that day with K'atun rituals performed by several earlier rulers. The second section, from D17 to F23, pertains to the important recent history of Tikal, much of it surrounding the appearance of the outsider Siyaj K'ahk' in the year AD 378 and the reign of the local ruler, Nun Yax Ahiin, whose crowning he oversaw. The story of that king's son, Siyaj Chan K'awiil, makes up the third broadly defined section of the text, from E24 to the end, culminating in the record of recent important events in his own life history, including the death of his grandfather, who we know as "Spearthrower Owl."

The opening Long Count date is 9.0.10.0.0 7 Ajaw 3 Yax, which fell in AD 445, in the reign of the ruler Siyaj Chan K'awiil. The ruler is named far below the Initial Series record in block B20. The intervening glyphs, from A12 through to the king's name

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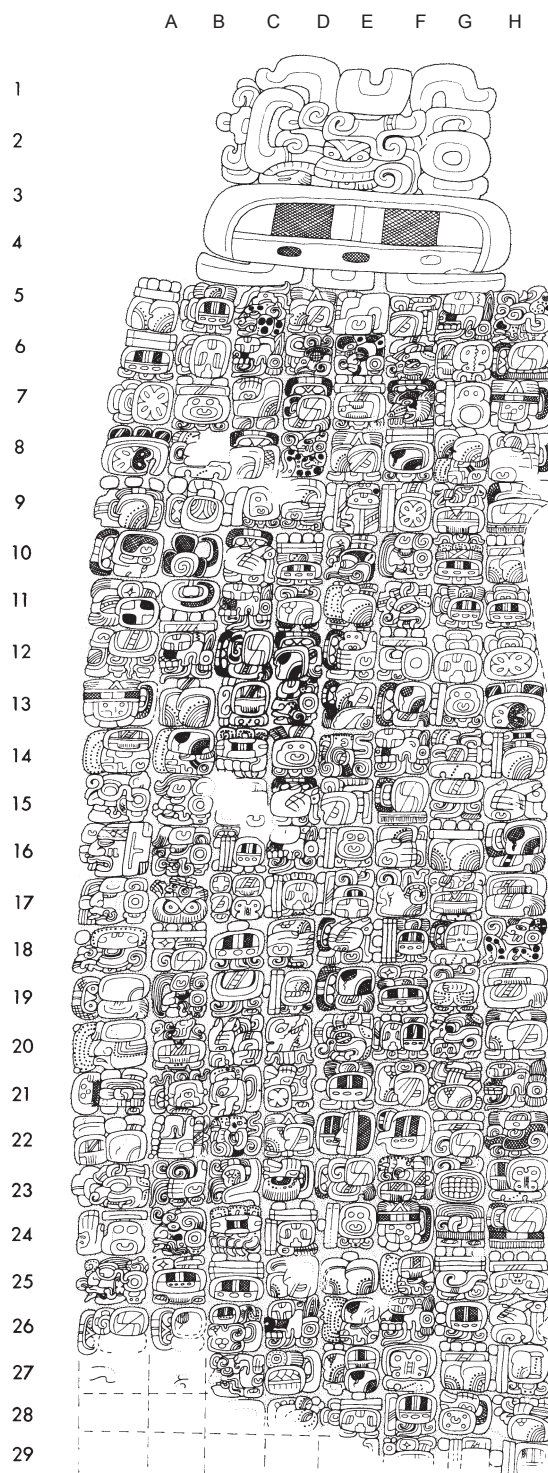


Figure 1. Tikal Stela 31, back. Drawing by William R. Coe.

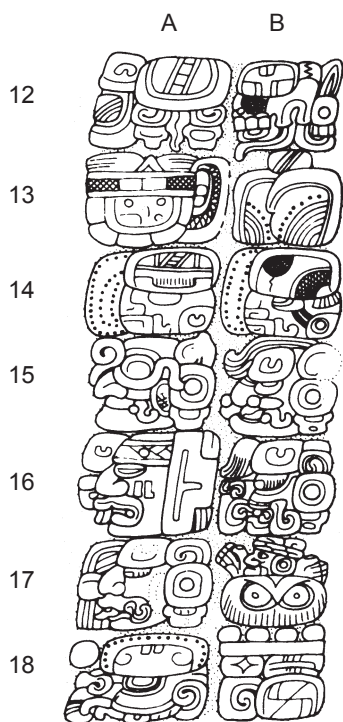


Figure 2. Opening passage from Stela 31 (A12-B18), describing the period ending 9.0.10.0.0. Drawing by William R. Coe.

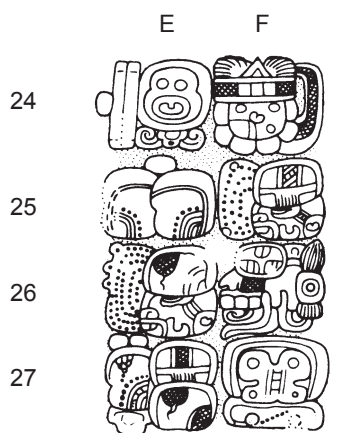


Figure 3. Passage from Stela 31 (E24-F27) describing the period ending 8.18.10.0.0. Drawing by William R. Coe.

glyphs, provide an unusual and elaborate description of the ritual significance of the period ending event. Its main event phrase (Figure 2) begins at A12 with the important rhetorical term read *alay* or perhaps *ayal*. It functions mostly as a focus marker within a larger narrative, perhaps semantically as a demonstrative term like “here” or “then.” If it is *ayal*—a reading that I think deserves further consideration—it may be derived from the general verb *ay*, “to be, exist.” However this glyph proves to be read, it introduces the verb *uhtiiy* (UH-ti-ya), “it happened” (B12), which in turn precedes another verb phrase that carries the semantic weight of the passage. This is the intransitive form *tahn-lam-aj*, “it half-diminishes,” based on a glyph that has long been called the “half-period” (A13). Some years ago I proposed a reading of TAHN-LAM for the two basic components of this glyph, and more recently Wichmann (2004) has provided a thorough analysis of its varied forms and syntactic environments. In this context, the noun *tahn-lam* is derived as an intransitive verb by the suffix *-aj*. Its subject comes next, written as 1-PIK [CHAN]K’UH [KABIK’UH (B13-B14). Despite superficial appearances and a calendrical context, the first of these is not a Bak’tun glyph. Rather, this is surely an elaboration on the important collective term we find in a number of Maya texts, *juun pik k’uh*, “the eight thousand gods.” Here the scribes have described the whole quantity of Maya deities in more precise terms as *juun pik chan(al) k’uh kab(al) k’uh*, “the eight thousand heavenly gods and earthly gods.” Elsewhere, at Copan and other sites, we sometimes come across non-quantitative mentions of the same grouping as “the heavenly gods (and) the earthly gods.”

From A15 through to B18 we find names and references to other deities or classes of gods. These are either references to subcategories of the “eight thousand,” or they represent separate classifications of divine beings. These include the “Paddlers” (A15-B15) and their wind-god companion (A16), the Principal Bird Deity (B16), the sun god (A17), a variety of a Water Serpent (B17-A18), and finally Bolon Tz’akab Ajaw, a common term that I believe is close to an ancient Maya term for “dynastic lords” or “dynasty.” Literally it is something akin to the “many sequential lords.”

As an aside, it’s worthwhile mentioning that another period ending recorded later in Stela 31’s inscription offers what seems to be a similar but abbreviated statement about gods and their “diminishing” (Figure 3). Blocks E24-F27 mention the half-period 8.18.10.0.0 11 Ajaw 18 Pop, when again the “eight thousand heavenly gods and earthly gods half-diminished.” The phrase here contains no elaborated list of deities, just the general categories of deities associated with the sky and the earth.

The question here is just how are gods “half-diminished” on these period endings? This date, 9.0.10.0.0, is the half of a K’atun. The phrasing thus brings to mind that the named collectivities of gods in some way represent or embody the K’atun period itself. That is to say, time is not here represented as some abstract tally of Tuns or days, but as animate divine beings. As time passes, they “diminish” (*lam*). The wording here, I think, provides a compelling window onto ancient Maya concepts of time ritual, and of the actions surrounding different types of period endings. If gods “diminish” with the passage of units within a K’atun, the ending of the K’atun would seem a potent time of renewal and regeneration.

The text goes on to state that the ruler Siyaj Chan K’awiil “oversaw” this period ending (Figure 4). This translation of the common phrase *u kabij*, so often used in

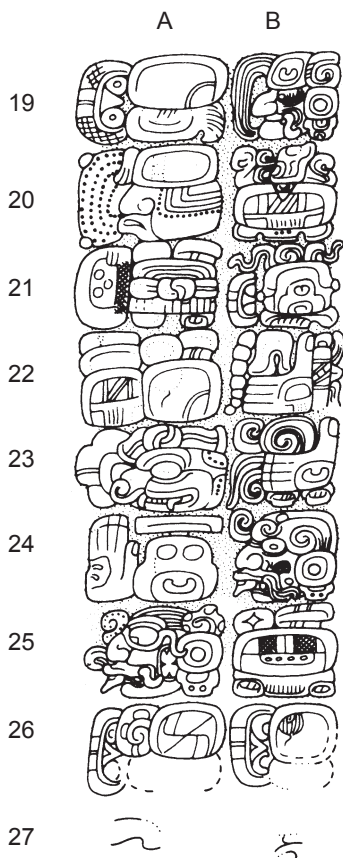


Figure 4. Blocks A19-B27 from Stela 31. Drawing by William R. Coe.



Figure 5. The paired glyphs U-TZAK-bu-ji / U-KAB-ji. Drawing by William R. Coe.

Maya epigraphic literature, may not get to crux of its true significance, however. It is worth remembering that this widely accepted reading for this glyph is based on a meaning of the verb *chabi* in Tzeltalan languages (Laughlin 1988:1:184-185), where it is “to husband (animals), to tend (milpa), to govern, to work.” It derives from an earlier noun root *kab*, “earth” (present in other Mayan languages, although no longer in Tzeltal or Tzotzil) and seems to have originated as a derivation for “to do earth, to make milpa.” The glyph *u kab-ij* (**U-KAB-ji**) (Figure 4, A19) is probably a nominal derivation of this, “the doing of,” or more precisely, “the tending of.” In this sense, the Stela 31 passage points to Siyaj Chan K’awiil as the metaphorical caretaker not just of time in an abstract sense, but as one who cared for or tended to deities who were in the process of “diminishing” over the course of time. If I am correct, the text points to the idea that the gods were not necessarily strong or pervasive, but were in need of the king to look after them and work toward their ultimate renewal and regeneration at the turn of the K’atun period. At the very least this notion of the king as a sort of agricultural ritualist is, as I’ve argued elsewhere, at the root of much of Maya ideology and kingship (Stuart 2005).

The opening passage continues with records of Siyaj Chan K’awiil’s parents. His father is named at A23 as Nun Yax Ahiin, the important Tikal ruler known for his strong connections to Teotihuacan. The king’s mother is named from A24-B25, although it is difficult to see this as the historical name of a woman; it rather seems to include references to different gods, including G1 and a variant of the sun god. It also seems to be clearly referencing the name of one of the ancestors depicted on the stela’s front as the large ornate head on the king’s belt. This may be an unusual figurative reference to the mother of Siyaj Chan K’awiil.

### Remembrance of K’atuns Past

Next comes what I take to be a key phrase for understanding much of the entire initial section of Stela 31’s text. This is a pair of glyphs, each marked with the third-person possessive pronoun **U-** (Figure 5). Together they read **U-TZ’AK-bu-ji / U KAB-ji**, and we find them together in three settings in Stela 31’s inscription. Apart from columns A and B, the pairing occurs twice in C and D, always introducing records of early K’atun endings by ancestral kings—a pattern that suggests a similar role in the now-destroyed section at the base of columns A and B, where we presumably would have seen the first such record, pertaining to a very distant ancestor of Tikal.

Each glyph is a derived term, the first based on the verb root *tz’ak*, “be whole, complete,” the other, as we’ve already seen, is founded on the noun *kab*, “earth.” The morphological analysis of the paired glyphs themselves is still open to some debate; some prefer to see them both as derived transitive verbs, whereas others have suggested their role as derived nouns. It is a question that is still difficult to resolve. Part of the problem centers on the fundamental issue that nouns and verbs are not easy categories to separate in Mayan languages in general. The details behind this issue go well beyond the scope of the present analysis, but for now I prefer to analyze one as a verb and the other as its direct object, in this way:

**U-TZ’AK-bu-ji / U-KAB-ji**  
*u tz’ak-Vb-ij u kab-ij*  
 “he/she/it completes the work of...”

“Complete” might be too vague a translation of the first glyph, for the sense of *tz’ak* and its derived forms more accurately revolves around concepts of “wholeness,” or

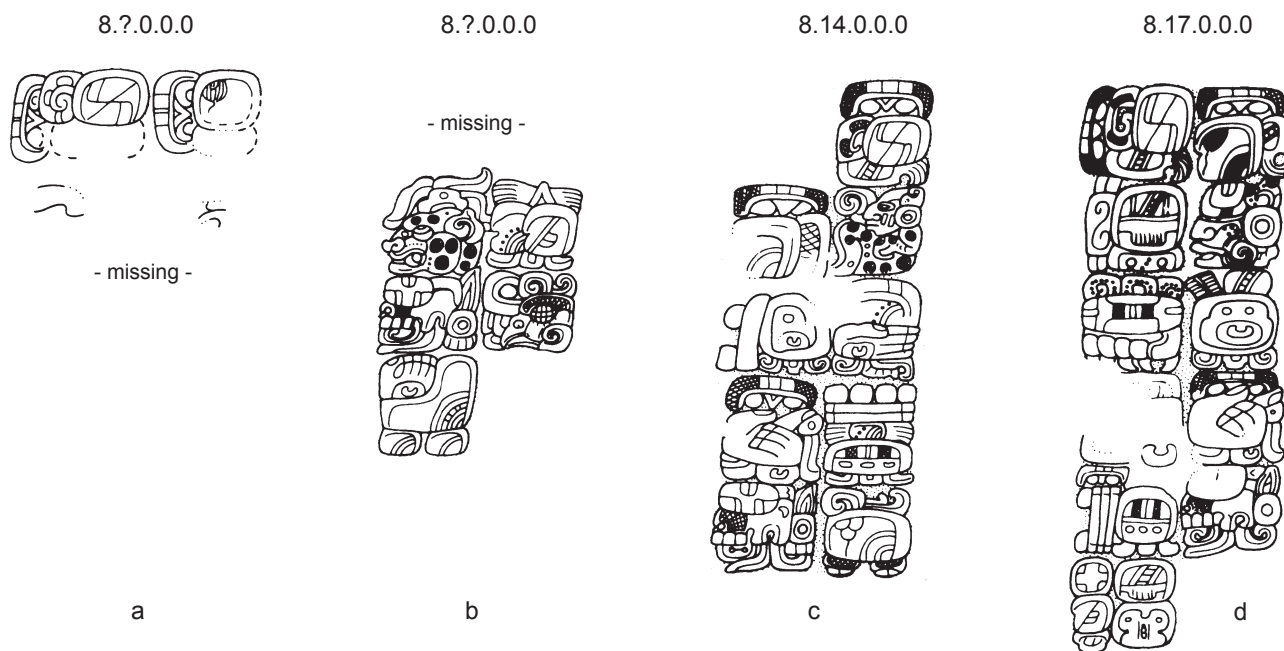


Figure 6. Comparison of four passages from Stela 31 referencing early K'atun endings: (a) A26-B27; (b) C5-C7; (c) D7-D11; (d) C12-C17. Drawing by William R. Coe.

“fulfillment” (Stuart 2003). The idea would seem to be that some person or action “completes” or “fulfills” the works and ritual acts of another.

Let us jump forward a bit and analyze the use of this *u tz'ak-Vb u kab-ij* phrase in the passage that runs from D7 to D11 (Figure 6c). This records the period ending 8.14.0.0.0 7 Ajaw 3 Xul, nearly 130 years prior to the dedication of Stela 31. The king of this time was “Baby Jaguar” (Martin 2003), perhaps *Unen Bahlam*. The full statement, as I paraphrase it, is:

“It fulfills the work of  
 Baby Jaguar on 7 Ajaw, when he stone-binded.  
 He ended 14 K'atuns.  
 It happened at *Tuun-nal*.”

The subject of the first verb is, I think, either Siyaj Chan K'awiil or his ritual performance on 9.0.10.0.0, the day of Stela 31's dedication. It may be hard to discern its function within the larger narrative, but I take the phrase to refer to the “completion” or “fulfillment” (*tz'ak-Vb*) of the ritual actions performed by the ruler's ancestors in the distant past. Or, perhaps better put, that the work of Siyaj Chan K'awiil on 9.0.10.0.0 represents the continuation and culmination of many like-in-kind period ending ceremonies (or “works”) in earlier history.

There were probably four such back-looking references to earlier K'atuns in the narrative, linking the contemporary ceremony with those of royal ancestors

(Figure 6). The dates for the first two are missing, but they would pre-date 8.14.0.0.0. The third and fourth references in columns C and D culminate in a record of 8.17.0.0.0, when Chak Tok Ich'aak of Tikal also ended a K'atun and performed a stone-binding ceremony. In all of these, I argue, Siyaj Chan K'awiil juxtaposes the ancestral events with his own performance as a king, following in their ritual footsteps.

### An Ambiguous Distance Number

The problematic reconstruction of certain historical dates has frustrated some earlier analyses of Stela 31's inscription. The crux of the problem has mostly concerned two Distance Numbers in the middle passages of the inscription. They are written very clearly as 17.10.12 and as 1.5.2.5, but the bases of their respective calculations seem ambiguous, or at least unclear.

The DN between Dates C and D (see Summary of Dates on page 8) does provide a simple span, but the ambiguity comes in with the next DN recorded at D24, C25. Many have assumed that this must be calculated from the date that immediately precedes it, the arrival date 11 Eb 15 Mak. In their published analysis, Jones and Satterthwaite offer an alternative, suggesting that this DN connects with an “8 Eb” recorded later at E7, perhaps calculated from a far earlier period ending. They equate the end of this calculation to possibly 8.14.17.10.12, which

of course is far earlier than any of the dates surrounding it. The main problem here, however, is that the day sign recorded at E7 is not Eb, but rather very clearly Men. This misidentification (known to epigraphers for many years) was a significant point of confusion in their earlier analysis, but it need not be any longer; we should reject their placement of Date F, which we will return to momentarily.

But if the DN does not relate to the chronology recorded in the upper blocks of columns E and F, how do we analyze it? Grube and Martin (2000), well aware of the problems in Jones and Satterthwaite's analysis, proposed that a DN of 17.12.10 should be reckoned backward from the 11 Eb base date, reaching 8.16.3.10.2 11 Ik' 10 Sek. This was based on the assumption, it seems, that an event written as *och-witz* (enter-mountain) after the DN at block C26 was somehow rhetorically parallel to the death reference of the ruler Chak Tok Ich'aak at D23, C24 (see Stuart 2000). I see no reason to follow this reconstruction, however, since the two events might be completely different in time. As an alternative, we might simply propose to add it to the 11 Eb date in this straightforward manner:

8.17. 1. 4.12 11 Eb 15 Mak      arrival of Siyaj K'ahk'  
+ 17.10.12  
**8.17.18.15. 4 12 K'an 17 Pop**      *och witz*

This does not necessarily follow the linear temporal flow either, as 8.17.18.15.4 falls after a date still to be recorded in columns E and F. Even so, it's perhaps worth mentioning that this type of forward count does conform to the pattern we see in a later, somewhat parallel passage from F20 through E21, where a DN is counted forward from an important historical base date in order to present parenthetical information for the larger dynastic narrative.

No matter where we place this date, the event associated with it is recorded at the very bottom of columns C and D, with the following glyphs, beginning with block C26 (we will come back to discuss D25).

**i-OCH-WITZ / UH-ti-ya / CHAHK-ke-la / PAT-ja ...**  
*i och witz uht-iiy Chahkel. Pataj ...*  
 then he enters the mountain(s) at Chahkel(?). ...?.. is made...

The term *och-witz*, "enters the mountain" may well be a euphemism for death, but we cannot be sure. It is an extremely rare phrase in Maya inscriptions, with only one firmly established example on a looted inscribed panel from the region of Bonampak or Lacanha, Chiapas.

Semantically it has no parallels in modern or historical Mayan languages, as far as I'm aware. Nevertheless, I get the sense from the Stela 31 passage that the 17.10.12 DN is designed to provide a side-story to the main narrative flow of the inscription, whether one opts for it as signaling a backward or a forward count. For now, I prefer to see it as an appended statement about Siyaj K'ahk's later history, that some seventeen years after his arrival, he "entered the mountain." This may refer to his death, or perhaps, to his "heading for the hills" after his stint as a major political figure in the central Maya lowlands came to an end. Given the damage to the text we will probably never know exactly.

The upper glyphs in columns E and F pertain in part to the accession of the important Tikal ruler Nun Yax Ahiin, who assumed power under interesting circumstances on 8.17.2.16.17 5 Kaban 10 Yaxk'in. As we've noted, the partial date recorded at E7 is 8 Men, and at first this would presumably relate to the record of the accession as "10 Kaban 10 Yaxk'in" a few blocks later. Here we have a problem, however, for the accession date is firmly established by Stela 4 as 5 Kaban 10 Yaxk'in; the "10 Kaban" recorded on Stela 31 is therefore, as is widely agreed, an error, probably created by the scribe who interpreted the 8 Men as a record of a day two days prior. If they are not so close in time, however, what is the 8 Men reference all about? The nature of the event glyphs nearby is unclear, but it seems most economical to think that it's not linked directly to the accession date recorded after it, and that 8 Men, if accurately recorded, pertains to some other event in the story of Nun Yax Ahiin. A plausible contender could be the 8 Men station that precedes the accession date, 8.17.2.0.15 8 Men 13 Ch'en.

A second somewhat ambiguous DN appears at F20 and E21, written as 1.5.2.5 and linking some base date to what seems to be a death, recorded at E22 with the earliest attested example of the verb *cham*, "he dies" (**i-CHAM**). I, like others, have long preferred to see the protagonist of this phrase as Nun Yax Ahiin, featured immediately before this as the celebrant of the K'atun ending 8.18.0.0.0 (E16-E20). If this is the case, this DN is a forward count linking an event 25 years prior to the king's death, probably his accession on 8.17.2.16.17:

8.17. 2.16.17 5 Kaban 10 Yaxk'in  
+ 1.5. 2.5  
 8.18. 8. 1. 2    2 Ik' 10 Sip

The structure of this DN as written is very similar to what we find at D24-C26, where a span of time leads to

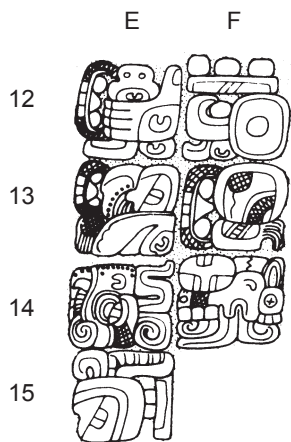


Figure 7. Passage from Stela 31 (E12-E15) describing a “taking,” associated with the accession of Nun Yax Ahiin. Drawing by William R. Coe.

the mysterious “mountain-entering” event. Both passages seem to mark the base-point of their respective counts with an unusual glyph written as **yu-ku-TE'** (D25) or **ku-yu-TE'** (F21), lending further support to some general connection between them. The parallel would, perhaps, bolster the claim that the *och witz* verb at the base of column C refers to some end-point in the story of Siyaj K'ahk'.

### The 28 Provinces?

Despite the apparent error in the day sign coefficient at F8, the accession of Nun Yax Ahiin is described from F8-F11 in a fairly straightforward way. What follows is a remarkable passage (Figure 7) providing some intriguing descriptive detail about this key historical episode. Beginning at E12, we read the phrase:

**U-K'AM-wa / 8-20-wa-PET / U-ku-chu-PAAT? / U-KAB-ji / SIH-K'AHK'**

*u k'amaw 28 pet(en?) u kuch paat(?) u kabij Siyaj K'ahk'*

“he receives the 28 provinces(?); it is his burden ?; it is the doing of Siyaj K'ahk'.”

Here we have firm evidence that Siyaj K'ahk' is the higher-ranking individual, overseeing in some way the accession of Nun Yax Ahiin. The direct object of the verb “take” or “receive” is a numbered noun, based on the term **PET**. This might be interpreted in various ways, but I am drawn to the possibility that this could be a reduced spelling of the familiar derived noun *peten*, meaning “island, province, region.” The spelling **PET-ne** for Peten is attested for this in later inscriptions (at Zacpeten and Naranjo) and given the penchant for early scribes to at times omit derivational endings in spelling, **PET** might be a reasonable glyphic representation of *peten*. Moreover, the inclusion of the term *kuch*, “burden,” in the larger phrase recalls the terminology of colonial Yucatec, where governance and rulership were explicitly described as a “burden” or “load” (*kuchkab*) of the ruler. If my inkling is correct, we may have here a record of the new king taking possession of some larger geopolitical structure or entity described as the “28 provinces” or something along similar lines.

One passage alone would seem slight evidence upon which to base such an interpretation of geopolitics, but there are numerous references to “28 lords” in inscriptions of the central lowlands, nearly all Late Classic in date (Figure 8). Often this collective category or description is mentioned near the end of a passage recording a Period Ending or some other ritual event. In those settings the phrase, “they see it, the 28 Lords,” will follow. I have long wondered whether this refers to some local collection of nobles who physically look on during a ceremony, or alternatively, if it relates to some category of elite peers who are external to a polity and who somehow “bear witness” to a ritual performance in a more figurative sense. However one prefers to interpret such statements, I think it may not be coincidental that the number 28 appears both in connection with the accession of an early Tikal lord and with a category of nobles. It may be a vague hint at some real or idealized number of “provinces” which existed in the central Peten region in the Classic period. That Siyaj K'ahk' would oversee their “taking” in some way is not too surprising, moreover, since his name appears in historical records far afield from the confines of Tikal and Uaxactun, at sites such as El Peru, Bejucal, and La Sufricaya (Stuart 2000; Estrada-Belli et al. 2009).

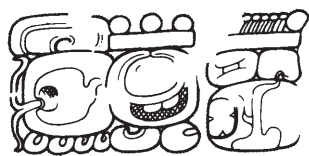


Figure 8. A reference to “28 lords” from Dos Pilas, Panel 19. Drawing by David Stuart.

## Closing Remarks

This note has presented a few jottings and thoughts-in-progress on the text of Stela 31 but has avoided any detailed analysis of the inscription as a whole. No doubt that will occupy epigraphers for many years to come. Instead I have only focused on a few related topics, such as the interpretation of the opening passage, issues of chronology, and the intriguing descriptions of Nun Yax Ahiin's accession to office. These reflect working ideas more than well-formed thoughts, but I hope they might spur some discussion and advances.

One final point worth mentioning centers on the larger rhetorical structure of Stela 31's text. As we have seen, the opening section of the narrative strives to link the rituals of a contemporary period ending (9.0.10.0.0) with similar ceremonies performed by ancestors before the disruptive events of Siyaj K'ahk's arrival in AD 378. The second section of the narrative highlights those difficult years when Nun Yax Ahiin was installed as a new ruler under the vassalage of Siyaj K'ahk'. We have known for some time that once Siyaj Chan K'awiil himself assumed the throne, he seemed to return to a more traditional Maya mode of art, iconography, and presentation. The text of Stela 31 with its emphasis on the king's "fulfillment" or "completion" of the works of those distant predecessors fits well with this idea. For whatever reason, Siyaj Chan K'awiil hearkened back to the accomplishments of earlier dynasts, while at the same time acknowledging the more recent history of his father's insertion into the ruling line of Tikal. As with the iconography on the front of the monument, the overall message of Stela 31's text reflects this overarching concern with making sure his own accomplishments were understood in the context of Tikal's traditions and lengthy royal history.

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**Tikal Stela 31: Summary of Dates**

Date A	9. 0.10. 0. 0	7 Ajaw 3 Yax	Dedication P.E.
	8. ?. 0. 0. 0	(missing)	Retrospective P.E.
	8. ?. 0. 0. 0	(missing)	Retrospective P.E.
Date B	8.14. 0. 0. 0	7 Ajaw 3 Xul	Retrospective P.E.
Date C	8.17. 0. 0. 0	1 Ajaw 8 Ch'en	Retrospective P.E.
	+ <u>1. 4.12</u>		
Date D	8.17. 1. 4.12	11 Eb 15 Mak	Arrival of Siyaj K'ahk'
	+ <u>17.10.12</u>		
Date E	8.17.18.15.4	12 K'an 17 Pop (?)	"mountain-entering"
Date F	8.17. 2. 0.15	8 Men 13 Ch'en (???)	?
Date G	8.17. 2.16.17	5 Kaban 10 Yaxk'in	Accession of Nun Yax Ahiin
Date H	8.18. 0. 0. 0	12 Ajaw 8 Sotz'	Period Ending
Date I	8.17. 2.16.17	5 Kaban 10 Yaxk'in	
	+ <u>1. 5. 2. 5</u>		
Date J	8.18. 8. 1. 2	2 Ik' 10 Sip	Death of Nun Yax Ahiin
Date K	8.18.10. 0. 0	11 Ajaw 18 Pop	Period Ending
	+ <u>5.11. 0</u>		
Date L	8.18.15.11. 0	3 Ajaw 13 Sak (?)	Accession of Siyaj Chan K'awiil
Date M	8.19. 0. 0. 0	10 Ajaw 13 K'ayab	Period Ending
Date N	8.19.10. 0. 0	9 Ajaw (3 Muwan)	Period Ending
Date O	9. 0. 0. 0. 0	8 Ajaw 13 Keh	Period Ending
	+ <u>3. 9.18</u>		
Date P	9. 0. 3. 9.18	12 Etz'nab 11 Sip	Death of "Spearthrower Owl"



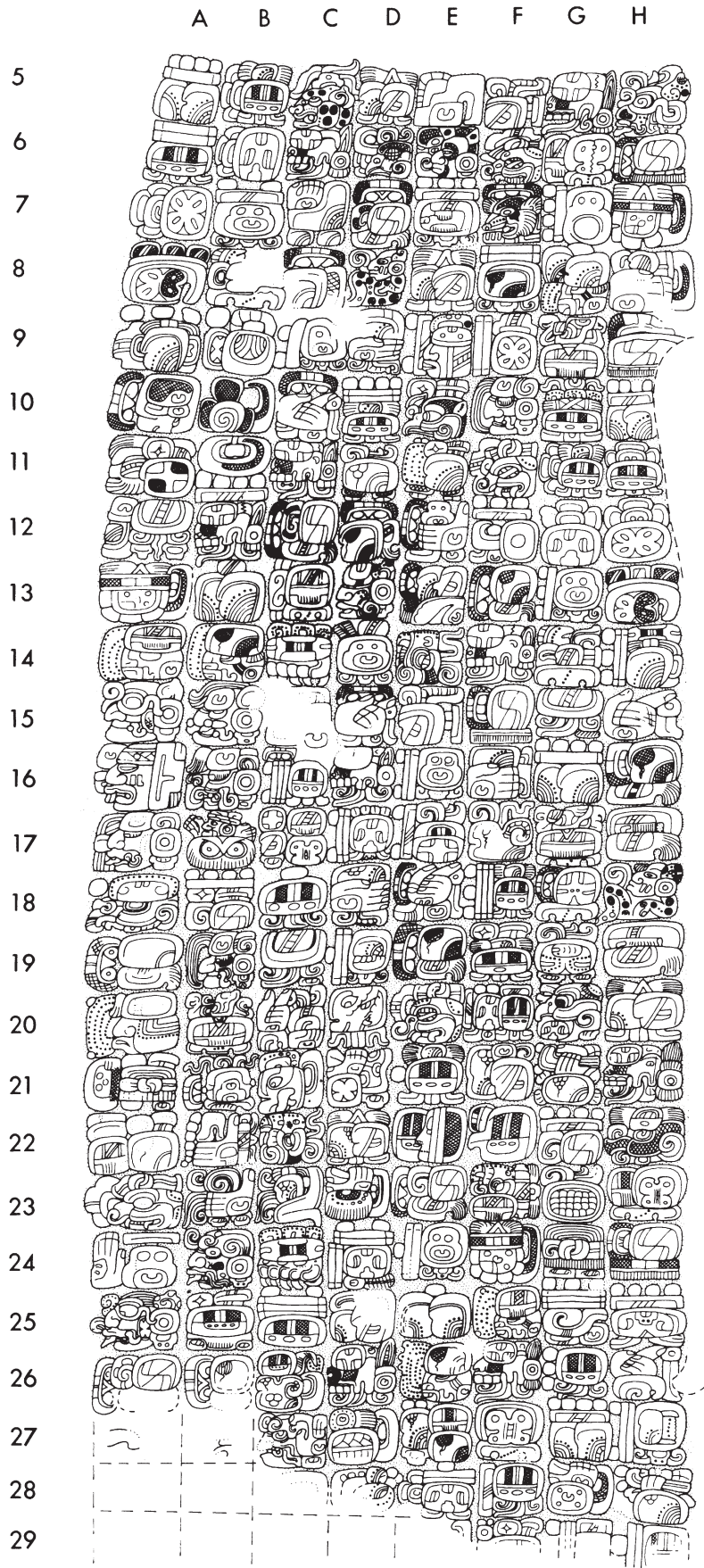


Figure 1. Tikal Stela 31, detail of back. Drawing by William R. Coe.