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Caracol Altar 21 Revisited: More Data on Double Bird and Tikal's Wars of the Mid-Sixth Century

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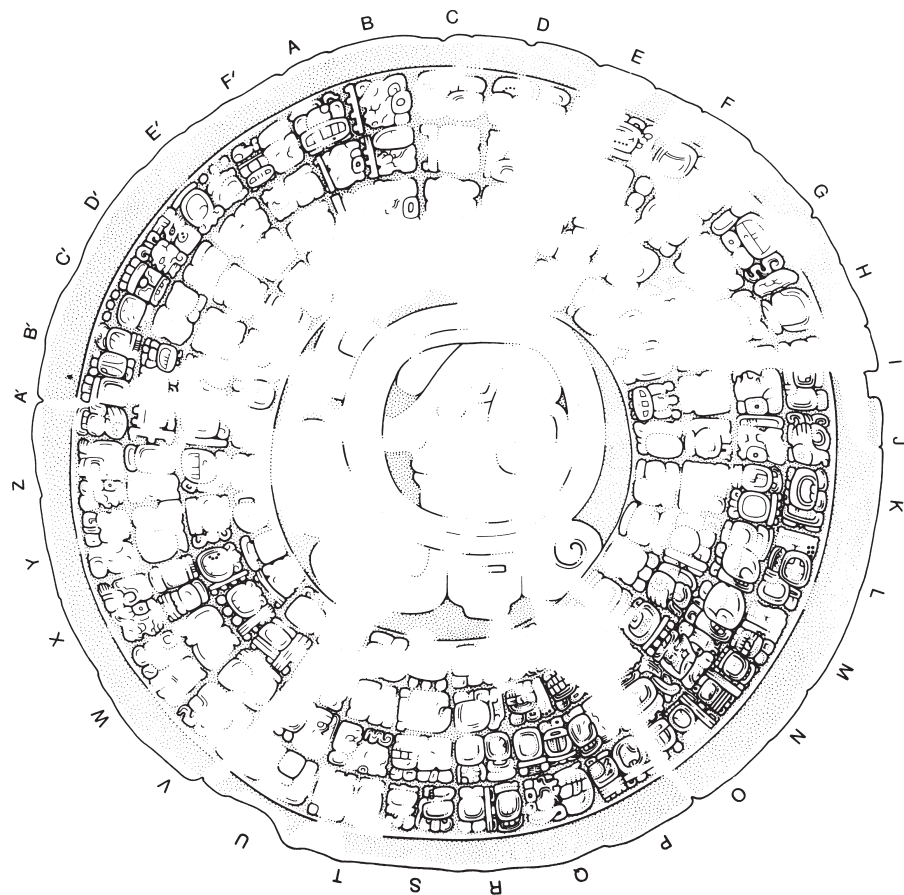


Figure 1. Caracol Altar 21 (drawing by Stephen Houston).

Altar 21 from Caracol, Belize, is one of the more important historical documents we have for the Classic Maya (Figure 1). It was excavated in 1985 by Keith Sullivan and Arlen Chase in the central playing alley of the Group A Ballcourt, where it seems to have served as a marker in the

game (Chase and Chase 1987:33). Bearing 128 glyph blocks, many of them divided into two compounds, it is the longest inscription yet found in Belize. Its sorry condition today—cracked, scarred, and abraded—means that no more than half of the text is legible. Nevertheless, close

study by Stephen Houston (1991) retrieved a surprising amount of information. Dedicated by K'an II in AD 633, its narrative reaches back some eighty years to recall events from the reign of his father Yajaw Te' K'inich II. Among these, the most notable are a sequence of three events concluding with a military defeat suffered by the kingdom of Tikal in AD 562. Since this coincides with the start of the "Tikal Hiatus"—a 130-year lacuna in monument dedications at the site—it has widely been seen as a decisive episode in Maya political history.

Yet none of the passages concerned are free of damage, and losses in important areas continue to pose interpretative problems. Given Altar 21's great significance, it is worth revisiting it to see if any additional data remains. With the kind permission of Jaime Awe, the Archaeological Commissioner for Belize, I was one of a party that recently re-studied the monument at night.¹ The examination was restricted to three sections of special interest that were photographed by Jorge Pérez de Lara, his close-up images forming the basis for a set of new drawings. This paper, perhaps better described as a collection of notes, reviews the results in each case and some implications arising from them.

1. The Accession

The retrospective section of Caracol Altar 21 begins with Yajaw Te' K'inich II's elevation to kingship in AD 553 (Figure 2). The phrase is rather effaced today, so we are fortunate that we can compare it with an almost identical one on the better-preserved Caracol Stela 6—produced by K'an II's half-brother and predecessor (Figure 3). In both cases we are told that he *chumljaj ta ajaw(lel)* "is seated in rulership," followed by his name and the Caracol royal title *k'uhul k'antumaak*. The latter is an unconventional emblem glyph that is hard to analyze and read with any confidence. After this we get a secondary phrase, headed by the damaged but recognizable verb *ukabjiij* "he supervised it." This serves to identify the agent or overseer of the foregoing event, and here we are told that the ceremony took place under the aegis of the ruler of Tikal (Grube 1994:106). At this point in its history Tikal was governed by its twenty-first king, a character long known to scholars as Double Bird. His only surviving monument, Tikal Stela 17, is believed to place his installation in AD 537 (Coggins 1975).²

In an earlier PARI Journal (Martin 2001), I described the two main names by which Double Bird was known to his contemporaries: Wak Chan K'awiil and Yax Ehb Xook K'inich. On Caracol Stela 6 we see the **YAX** "first" and the lashed ladder pictogram David Stuart reads as **EHB** "step," prefixed to a deity portrait whose (now empty) cheek cartouche strongly suggests the solar

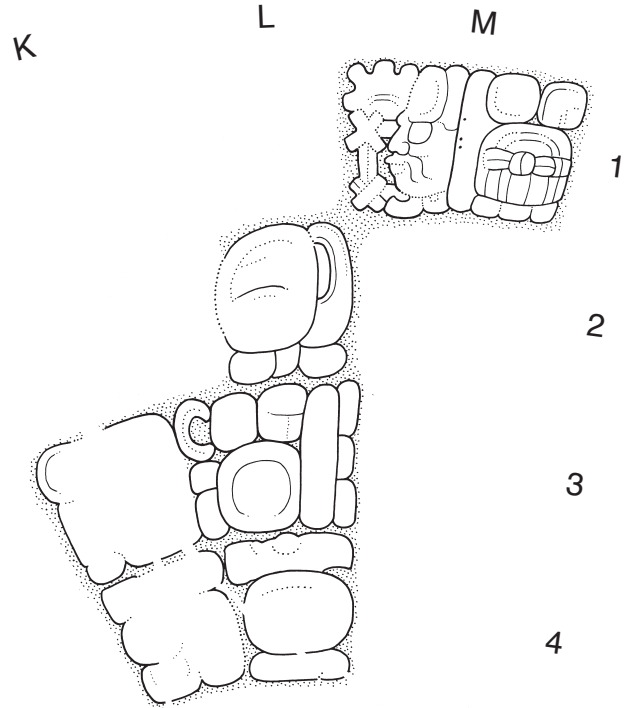


Figure 2. Accession of Yajaw Te' K'inich II on Caracol Altar 21 (L2b-M1) (this and all subsequent drawings by the author): *chumljaj ta ajawlel yajaw te' k'inich k'uhul k'antumaak ukabjiij yax ehb xook k'inich k'uhul mutal ajaw.*

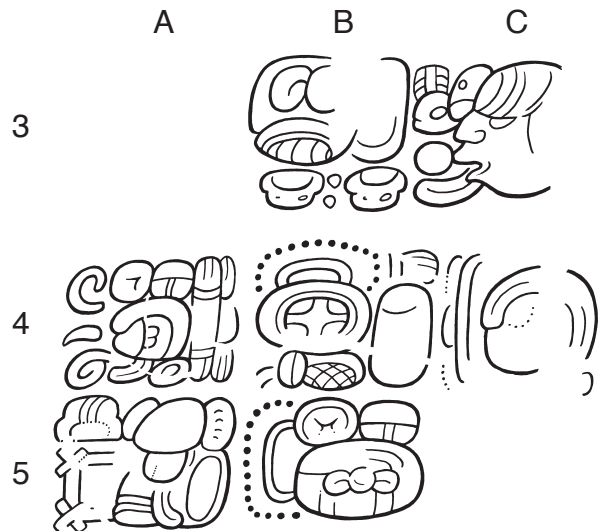


Figure 3. Accession of Yajaw Te' K'inich II on Caracol Stela 6 (B3-B5): *chumljaj ta ajawlel yajaw te' k'inich k'uhul k'antumaak ukabjiij yax ehb xook k'inich k'uhul mutal ajaw.*

¹ The group consisted of Alfonso Escobedo, Jorge Pérez de Lara, Joel Skidmore, and myself.

² Stela 17 was erected on the 1-K'atun anniversary of 9.5.3.9.15 AD 537, which fell on 9.6.3.9.15 AD 557. This is demonstrated by the partially erased verb *tz'ahpaj* "it is planted" (A8), and the following, barely visible, *tzuh tzaj* "it is completed" (A9).

deity **K'INICH** (A5). While we see little if any sign of it today, there is good reason to think that the shark-based monster **XOOK** was either conjoined or simply meant to be read (see below).³ The new drawing of Altar 21 shows M1a filled by this same name. In this case the portrait head is suffixed by a **wa** sign, indicating that the Sun God's name is the fuller form **K'INICH[AJAW]** *k'inich ajaw*.

The patron-client relationship between Tikal and Caracol is clearly of significance to the narrative at hand—Yajaw Te' K'inich makes no mention of it on his own monuments. Forthcoming conflicts on Altar 21 are in some way framed by this context, although the reason for mentioning it on Stela 6 is much less clear (perhaps due to the great deal of lost text there).

2. The Axe Attack

In AD 556, three years after Yajaw Te' K'inich's accession, Altar 21 describes an “axe” event (O2a, Figure 4) (Houston 1991:40). The verb concerned, widely read as **CH'AK-ka** *ch'ak* “to chop” (Orejel 1990), appears in two distinct contexts in the inscriptions. As *ch'ak ubaah* “his head was chopped,” it refers to human decapitation (Houston and Stuart 1998:77-78), but when applied directly to place names as *ch'ahkaj*, it can be translated as “it was damaged” and describes the sacking or desecration of such locations (Looper and Schele 1991:2). Where a defeated lord was the intended focus, the formula *ch'ak uch'een* “his *ch'een* was damaged” was employed (where *ch'een* “cave” is a contraction from *kab ch'een* “earth-cave,” a metaphorical term for “place” or “settlement”), followed by the defeated

lord's names and titles (Martin 2004:107-108).

Many epigraphers, including myself, have thought that the damaged subject, stretching from O2b into the next block at P2a, resembles the Caracol royal title *k'uhul k'antumaak*.⁴ If so, the *ch'ak* verb would be applied to an individual and necessarily refer to a beheading. Yet it is hard to find other instances of decapitation in the corpus where *ubaah* “his head” is omitted. The new drawing suggests other difficulties. The putative **K'UH** sign at the top right of O2 has internal details more typical of an **U** glyph, while the main sign below it shows no trace of the circular inline necessary for **K'AN**. In consequence, the remains are more consistent with ***U-CH'EEEN-na** *uch'een*. If so, the victim must be named in the badly destroyed block of P2a, where only a faint **ma** sign is visible. This could still be part of the Caracol title (similar spellings appear at X1b and Z1b in Figure 1)—although what remains in the rest of the compound is not especially encouraging.

The attacker carries a Tikal emblem (P3), but only traces of his preceding name now survive (O3). Even so, in the new drawing these are sufficient to recognize the scalloped edge of **YAX** and the cross-tied strut of **EHB**—the anticipated Yax Ehb Xook K'inich Ajaw is here once again.

To summarize, while Tikal is clearly the aggressor, we must exercise caution in identifying the victim. It is still possible that the axing phrase originally ran *ch'ak uch'een k'uhul k'antumaak*—indicating an attack against the Caracol king's home city, but in light of the damage to P2a we may never know for sure. If Caracol were not named here, it would have a dramatic impact on the historical narrative as we currently understand it. To date we have seen this episode as a *casus belli* and instigation for the next conflict.

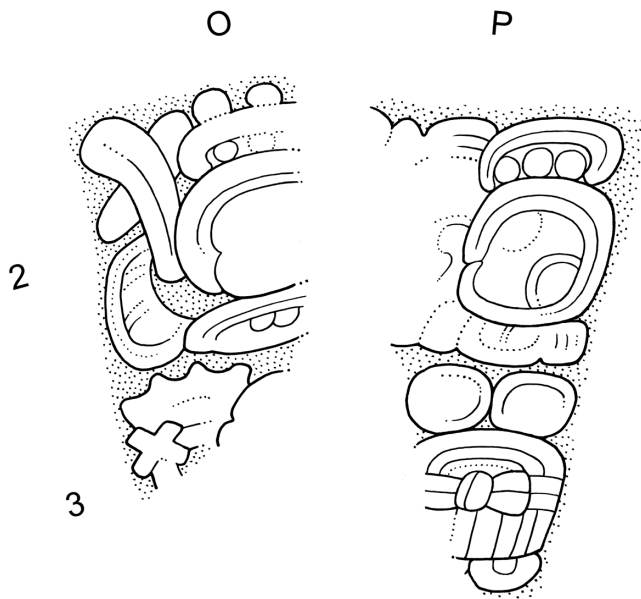


Figure 4. The Axe Event. Caracol Altar 21 (O2-P3): *ch'ahkaj uch'een ? ukabji yax ehb *xook *k'inich *k'uhul mutal ajaw*.

3. The “Star War”

The pivotal event in this section of Altar 21 is the defeat of Tikal that took place in AD 562 (Houston 1987:93, 1991:40). The verb is the famed, but still undeciphered, “star war” (R2b) (Figure 5). The subject is called simply the *k'uhul mutal ajaw* “Holy Lord of Tikal” (Q3), avoiding further repetition of Yax Ehb Xook K'inich Ajaw's name. Again, a damaged *ukabji* phrase (R3) introduces the agent (Q4-R4). This character's identifying glyphs are almost obliterated by a major crack through the stone, but some important details remain. In the first block,

³ Some questions remain about the **XOOK** value (see Jones 1996). It is believed to be the same word elsewhere spelled syllabically **xo-ki**, but no direct substitutions have been found as yet.

⁴ In this scenario the compound at O2-P2a would read: **CH'AK-ka-**K'UH-**K'AN-na-**tu-ma-**ki* ch'ak k'uhul k'antumaak***** “the Holy ‘Person of Caracol’ was chopped.”

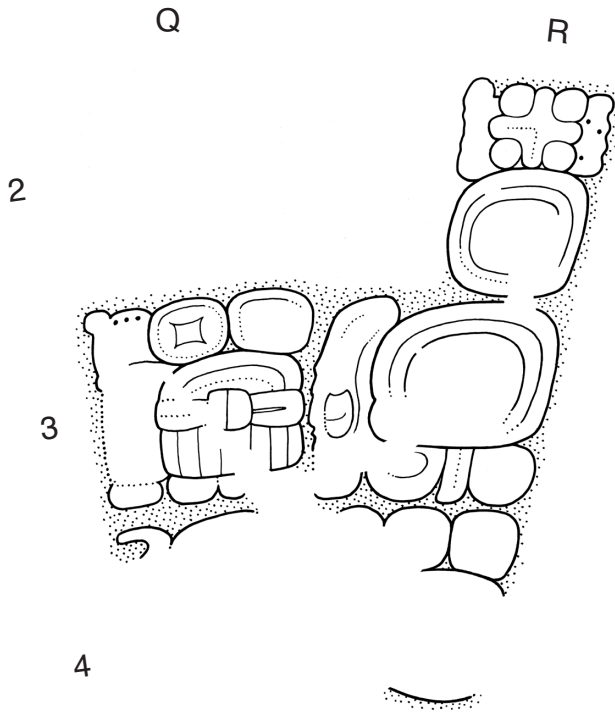


Figure 5. The Star War. Caracol Altar 21 (R2b-R4): ? *k'uhul mutal ajaw ukabiyy* ? ? **ajaw*.

where the personal name should be, we see an outward curl or tendril (equally visible in Houston’s original drawing). This is not something we find in Yajaw Te’ K’inich’s name (compare with Figure 3, A4)—a decisive argument against his presence here. The sign in question resembles the flame of **K’AHK’** “fire,” a common component in royal names. The next glyph group should represent the perpetrator’s royal epithet. Here the visible outlines are not consistent with the Caracol emblem (compare with Figure 3, B4) and look more like a conventional emblem glyph. As a result, there is no epigraphic reason to believe that Yajaw Te’ K’inich was the protagonist of this war—despite the firm place this idea has in the literature.⁵

So, who was the victor? We do have another candidate. A few phrases beyond the “star war” on Altar 21, but still set on the day of the battle, we see the emblem glyph of “Site Q” (U2a) (Houston 1991:41). Today we recognize this as the royal title of the *kan* or “Snake” polity, whose

seat lay at the great city of Calakmul from at least the seventh-century onwards. Altar 21’s creator, K’an II, makes a number of other references to this influential state and appears to have been its ally in an extended war against Naranjo (Martin and Grube 2000:91-92). The climax of this campaign came in AD 631 with a “star war” victory for which K’an II gives sole credit to his counterpart the Snake ruler.⁶

Another such mention comes on Caracol Stela 3, in a phrase dated to AD 572. The verb is now lost, but the subject is a Snake ruler whom I have nicknamed Sky Witness from the prominent “eye” and “sky” signs used in his nominal (Martin 1997:861) (Figure 6a-c).⁷ Given our interest in Q4 of Altar 21, it is notable that the “eye” glyph is another to offer a tendril motif in the top left position. The curvature of this element varies from one rendering to another, but the one at Q4 is within its stylistic range (Figure 7a-d). Moreover, we know that Sky Witness was in power at the time of the battle since he is mentioned at the site of Los Alacranes in 561 (Grube 2004:35). It should also be noted that the Snake emblem would comfortably fit the outlines left in R4.

In sum, while we do not know who defeated Tikal in 562, on current evidence we must discount Yajaw Te’ K’inich and look for other suspects. If the curl in Q4 was once part of the “fire” sign, then we are searching for a hitherto unknown adversary.⁸ If instead it originally formed part of the “eye” glyph, we have a contender

⁵ E.g., A. F. Chase and D. Z. Chase 1987:60, 1998:22; D. Z. Chase and A. F. Chase 2003:176; Schele and Freidel 1990:173.

⁶ This record appears on Step VI of the Naranjo Hieroglyphic Stairway. This monument was plainly made under the direction of K’an II, and I have suggested elsewhere that it once had its home at Caracol before its removal to Naranjo as a war trophy (Martin 2000b:57-58).

⁷ The Sky Witness name is poorly understood. It includes signs for **CHAN** “sky” and a human eye that may be bivalent: in some contexts reading **ILA** “to see, witness” (Stuart in Houston 1992:66) and in others perhaps **UT** “eye” (Nikolai Grube, pers. comm. 1996—see **(h)ut* in Kaufman and Norman 1984:120). The Sky Witness name includes other elements: the pronoun **U** and the sign numbered T650 in Thompson’s catalog (1962), as well as T134—possibly an abbreviated **no** syllable here (Martin 1997:861).

⁸ Interestingly, a mysterious character with a **K’AHK’**-prefixed name may be named as the overlord of a Tikal ruler on a “Naranjo-style” Tepeu 1 vase excavated at Uaxactun (Smith 1955: Fig. 80d).

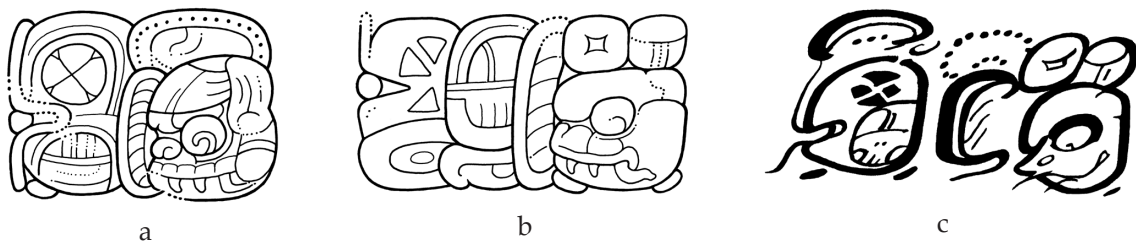


Figure 6. The name of Sky Witness: a) Caracol Stela 3 (A13), b) Palenque House C Step (D1c-d), c) Codex-style vessel (K6751) (K2b-L2).

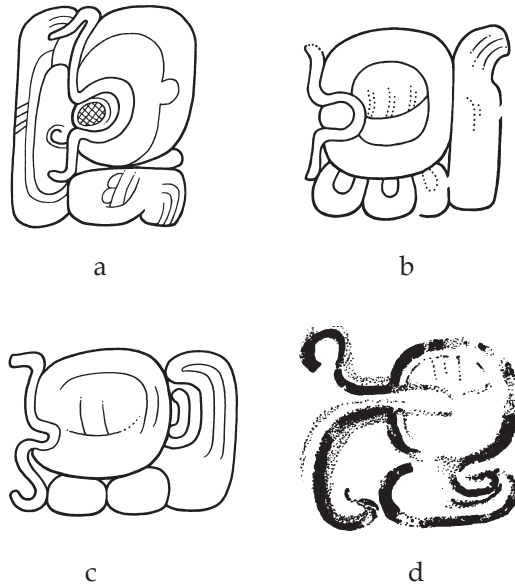


Figure 7. Variation in the “eye” glyph: a) Site Q Glyphic Panel 7 (pB4); b) Calakmul Stela 33 (G5); c) Aguas Calientes Stela 1 (C2); d) Naj Tunich Drawing 25 (A3) (after a photo by Chip and Jennifer Clark in Stone 1995:Fig. 8-27).

in the person of Sky Witness (Martin 2000a:41). It was certainly the Snake polity and Calakmul that benefited most during Tikal’s long era of silence, extending its power throughout the central lowlands—while Caracol, by contrast, is never mentioned outside its immediate region.

The Names of Double Bird

As we have seen, all three direct references to Double Bird at Caracol use the Yax Ehb Xook K’inich Ajaw moniker (Figure 8). With this as our spur, we might make a fresh assessment of the relative importance of his appellatives. Like all his contemporaries, Double Bird had a lengthy nominal sequence, consisting largely of deity-names in a standard, though not entirely fixed, order (Martin 2001:Fig. 7).⁹ Maya lords may have accrued names at various points in their childhood, but it was on their accession to kingship that they gained a particular regnal name, often taken from a grandfather or some other ruling predecessor.¹⁰ Name-taking was described in the texts with the expression *k’ahlaj uhuun k’aba’*, probably “his headband-name was tied.” Moral-Reforma Stela 4 tells of a lord who received three separate investitures of this kind—on the second and third occasions under different foreign patrons (Martin 2003a). Appropriately enough, on each he appears to have acquired a new regnal name.¹¹

The Yax Ehb Xook K’inich Ajaw sequence is an expanded form of the Tikal dynastic founder’s name (Schele 1986:6-8; Stuart 1999; Martin 2003b:4-6) (Figure

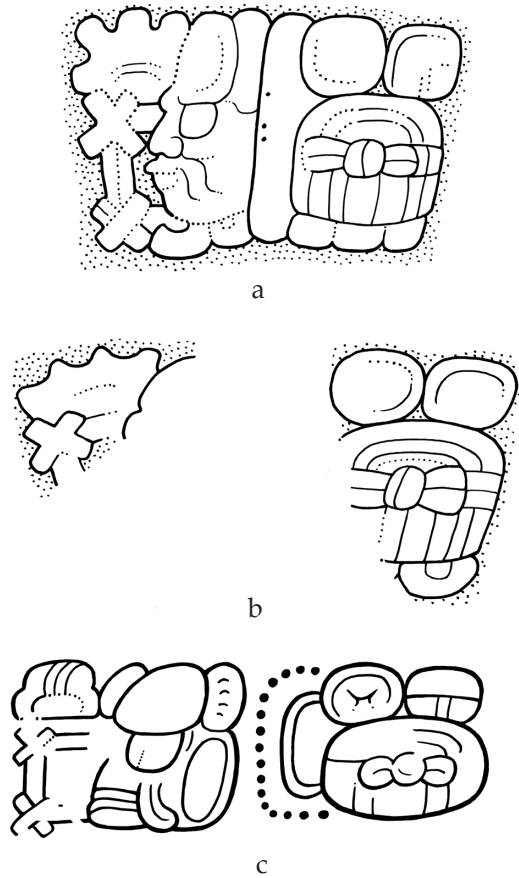


Figure 8. Yax Ehb Xook K’inich at Caracol: a) Caracol Altar 21 (M1); b) Caracol Altar 21 (O3-P3); c) Caracol Stela 6 (A5-B5).

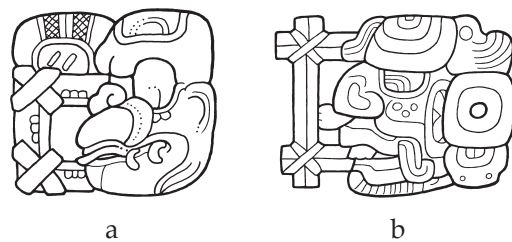


Figure 9. “Founder” names at Tikal: a) Tikal Stela 5 (A6); b) Stela 26 (zA9).

⁹ See Colas 2004 (as yet only available in German) for the most detailed treatment to date of Maya naming practices.

¹⁰ Although this became their primary appellative in public inscriptions, it could still be combined with a child-name where confusion with past namesakes was likely.

¹¹ The names carried by the thrice-invested king on Moral-Reforma Stela 4 are: U-?-ki?-K’INICH (B9), as an infant, then MUWAAN[JOL]-pa?-ka?-la (C8, E5), and finally PIK-? (E12-F-12).

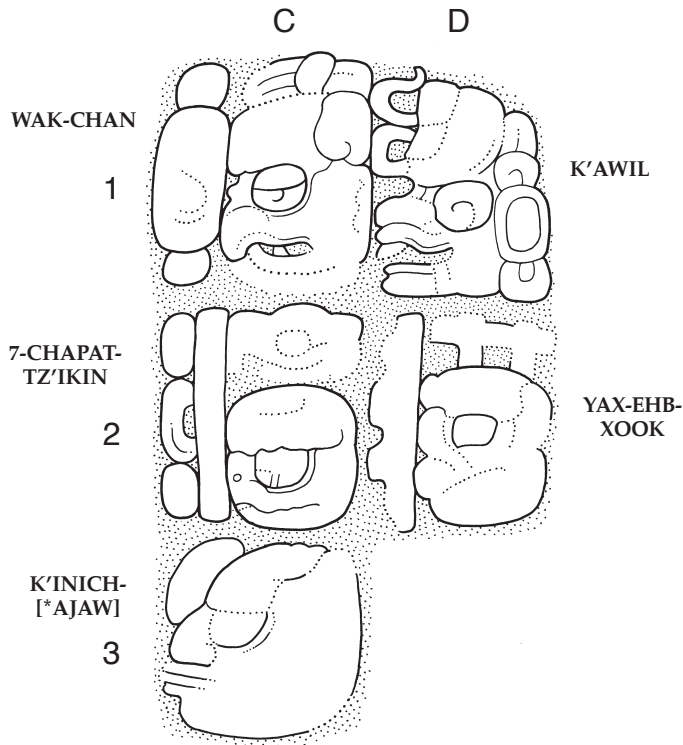


Figure 10. Tikal Stela 17 (C1-C3): *wak chanal k'awiil wuk chapaat tz'ikin yax ehb xook k'inich *ajaw*.

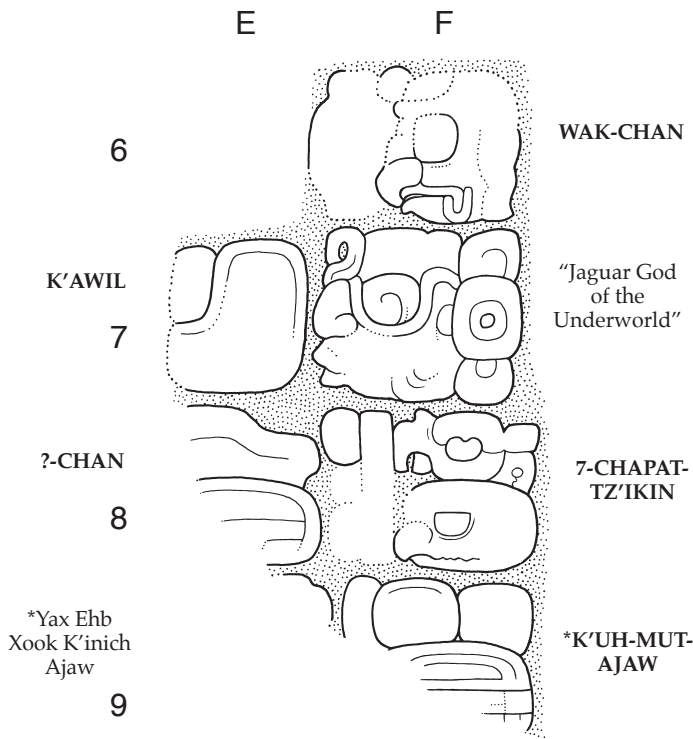


Figure 11. Tikal Stela 17 (F6-F9): *wak chanal k'awiil "JGU" k'ahk' ? chan (yopaat) wuk chapaat tz'ikin *yax *ehb *xook *k'inich *ajaw *k'uhul mutal *ajaw*.

9a). At least five Tikal rulers carried this form at the end of their own nominal strings. Double Bird's version combines it with the name of the Sun God **K'INICH[AJAW]**, which we can compare with a patron deity named on Tikal Stela 26 (Figure 9b). This addition has some further implications. To appreciate these we must look to the left side of Tikal Stela 17 where, sandwiched between Wak Chanal K'awiil¹² and Yax Ehb Xook K'inich Ajaw, we see the compound **7-CHAPAT-TZ'IKIN** *wuk chapaat tz'ikiin* "Seven Centipede Eagle"—a key part of certain Sun God names (Boot 2002) (Figure 10).¹³ It is invariably joined to *k'inich ajaw* (or its abbreviation), implying that the whole sequence Wuk Chapaat Tz'ikiin Yax Ehb Xook K'inich Ajaw was a single unit. This would be the name of a particular solar god, very likely a deified form of the Tikal founder, and the versions we see at Caracol would amount to abbreviations of the full form.

We can now turn to another important name sequence for Double Bird, this time on the back of Stela 17, and reconstruct the compound just before the Tikal emblem glyph (Figure 11). Since Wuk Chapaat Tz'ikiin precedes it (F8) we can surmise that Yax Ehb Xook K'inich Ajaw once filled the chipped off block (E9). Occupying the final, privileged position in two instances on Stela 17—and being the sole form in mentions at Caracol—we can be confident that this was his main regnal designation and not an appended epithet in the way plain Yax Ehb Xook functioned for other Tikal rulers.

This leaves the question of why an earlier member of the nominal series, Wak Chanal K'awiil, predominates in other contexts, such as ceramic vessels (Figure 12a). This is true even on a plate, K8121, where the king celebrates the K'atun ending ceremony of 9.6.0.0.0 in AD 554 (Figure 13). The use of alternate regnal names is not unique among Maya kings but does deserve closer examination in this case. The answer could lie in the unusual circumstances of Double Bird's rise to power.

Double Bird was the son of Tikal's eighteenth king Chak Tok Ich'aak II. However, he did not succeed his father on his death in AD 508, and instead three years later the six-year-old Lady of Tikal was inaugurated as *ajaw*—apparently in

¹² On the painted plate K8121 there is a clear T78 NAL suffix to **CHAN**. This is enough to indicate that the proper reading was *chanal* "sky-place," a value that was simply underspelled elsewhere.

¹³ The last nominal element here serves elsewhere as the fifteenth day in the Sacred Round ("Tzolk'in") calendar, for which Eric Thompson first proposed the value **TZ'IKIN** "eagle," recently revived by both Erik Boot and David Stuart. As with **XOOK** (see Note 3) we currently lack a syllabic substitution with which to confirm the value.

association with an older male, Kaloomte' Bahlam, said to be Tikal's nineteenth king (Martin 1999, 2003b:18-21). Double Bird appears only in 537, the date of the damaged passage on Tikal Stela 17 presumed to record his accession. Significantly, this is preceded by another event on an unknown date that apparently consists of *ihuli* "then he arrived (here)" (Martin 2003b:23, 43).¹⁴ If Double Bird did indeed return to Tikal we might reasonably ask where he came from.

We have no hard information on this, but one potential clue warrants discussion. This comes from a previously unseen vase, K8763 (Figure 14), whose owner uses the Wak Chanal K'awiil name. Stanley Guenter has identified the title he bears as a rare variant of the Naranjo emblem glyph—making him, if so, a one-time ruler of that polity (personal communication 2004) (Figure 12b).¹⁵ We would normally take this to be a simple namesake, were it not for a series of links between Tikal and Naranjo at this time, most concentrated in the reign of Chak Tok Ich'aak II. These suggest political, and perhaps even

¹⁴ I have examined Tikal Stela 17 with the idea that this glyph could be a damaged version of *itzutzuy* "then it is completed." However, I can see no trace of the "jewel" from T218 TZUTZ having sheared away and must therefore connect it with examples of T713b on Naranjo Stela 8 and 13, where a plain pointing hand has the value HUL (Martin 2003b:43). The Calendar Round date for this event can be reconstructed as 11/12/13 Manik' 10 ?. One of the better options available is 13 Manik' 10 Xul 9.5.3.1.7 (AD 537), some eight months before the main "inaugural" event.

¹⁵ The Tepeu 1 style of the vessel puts certain limits on where this character could fit in the Naranjo dynastic sequence, if we consider his a discrete reign. The inception of Tepeu 1 is judged to fall around AD 550, although polychrome painting with historical texts was certainly in place earlier than this (see Martin and Grube 2000:70). The sophistication of K8763 (which comes from the same school that produced K530) rather resembles works from the late sixth-century. Yet Tepeu 1 pieces such as K8121, carrying the date AD 554, are also very fine and make a stylistic chronology uncertain.

Aj Wosaaj Chan K'inich (Double Comb), described as Naranjo's thirty-fifth king, acceded in 546 and did not relinquish power until at least 615. We do not have names for either the preceding thirty-fourth or succeeding thirty-sixth kings. From the thirty-seventh incumbent onwards we have a rather complete list, leaving these two as the best candidates. According to Naranjo Stela 25, Aj Wosaaj Chan K'inich was a client of the Snake kingdom, but this does not preclude a complex, shifting relationship between Naranjo and the two great powers of the time, poorly reflected in monumental inscriptions.

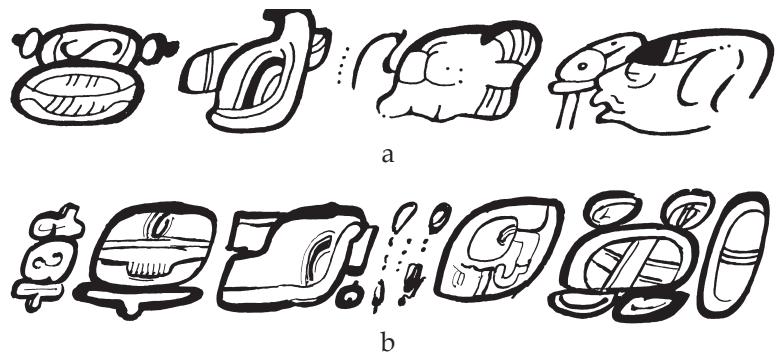


Figure 12. The Wak Chanal K'awiil name on painted ceramics: a) unprovenienced vessel, b) unprovenienced vessel (K8763) (9-12).



Figure 13. Unprovenienced plate (K8121) (after a photograph by Justin Kerr). Double Bird's name of Wak Chanal K'awiil "Jaguar God of the Underworld" appears in three glyphs beginning with the one arrowed.



Figure 14. Unprovenienced vessel, K8763 in Justin Kerr's MayaVase Database.

familial ties, although they remain very sketchy.¹⁶ If Double Bird were involved at Naranjo it might help to explain the unusual pattern of succession at Tikal.¹⁷ His continued use of the Wak Chanal K'awiil name could even suggest that it was well-established prior to 537, with Wuk Chapaat Tz'ikiin Yax Ehb Xook K'inich Ajaw a form he adopted only on his installation at Tikal. Even if K8763 itself turns out to be a red herring—which is to say that the emblem is not what it seems, or identifies an unconnected ruler—Tikal-Naranjo relations in the Early Classic deserve further study in the years ahead.

Acknowledgments

My thanks go to Jaime Awe, Pierre Robert Colas, T. Patrick Culbert, Alfonso Escobedo, Stephen Houston, Sharon Misdea, Jorge Pérez de Lara, Joel Skidmore, and David Stuart.

¹⁶ There are four items of interest here. Firstly, an effigy of the Principal Bird Deity, now in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, has a detachable ceramic tail inscribed with a cursively incised hieroglyphic text. It records the 9.3.0.0.0 Period Ending of AD 495 with the name and titles of Chak Tok Ich'aak II. The text concludes by calling him *umam sak chuwen*. *Umam* can mean "his grandson," "his grandfather," or "his ancestor;" while *sak chuwen* can be translated as "white artisan"—a title restricted to the kings of Naranjo (Closs 1984:80).

Next, Guenter (pers. comm. 2004) suggests that Chak Tok Ich'aak carries the head variant form of the *sak chuwen* title on Tikal Stela 3 (D4), an identification he also posits for a compound on Double Bird's Stela 17 (H3) (see Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: Figs. 4, 25). The glyphs G3-G5 in this section originally seemed to constitute names and titles belonging to the Tikal founder, but it might be better to view them as a continuation of Double Bird's own title sequence. If so, a royal name and emblem glyph of Xultun should be included in it, along with *sak chuwen* and a possible "lineage count" title of *uxlajuun te'* "13 Tree."

Fourth and finally, on a portion of Naranjo Stela 43, whose whereabouts is currently unknown, we see the Naranjo king Aj Wosaaj Chan K'inich (Double Comb) below an array of floating gods and ancestors. As noted by David Stuart (pers. comm. 2003), the head of one carries glyphs spelling the name Chak Tok Ich'aak, while the figure's face takes the form of the glyph *ch'ok* "youth/sprout." Chak Tok Ich'aak II's relatively young age at his accession is implied by the date of his *yax ch'ahbaj* "first sacrifice" in 486—a rite that is normally performed in childhood—just two years before he appears as king on Tikal Stela 3 from 488. Interestingly, Stela 1 from El Temblor, near Tikal, describes the accession of a Chak Tok Ich'aak (Stuart 2000:507, n. 4). The date is damaged and unclear, but this monument might yet prove to be one from Chak Tok Ich'aak II's reign.

¹⁷ While it is tempting to read a dynastic schism into the years c.508-537, the monuments of the Lady of Tikal and Kaloomte' Bahlam continued to be honored in the Great Plaza after 537, suggesting their legitimacy and an orderly transfer of power. Two monuments, Stela 23 and 25, were ultimately moved outside the Great Plaza (probably in late times), but others from this era, Stelae 6, 10, 12, and 14, remained there.

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Tikal Stela 17. Photograph by Sylvanus G. Morley.