

# Incidents of Ancient Maya History\*

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The northern lowlands of Guatemala are covered with a dense tropical forest that hides the ruins of many ancient Maya cities. Stone monuments with portraits of kings and with dates and texts are one of the major attractions to scholars. The structure of their calendar is known, and although the script remains undeciphered, we can now recognize some astronomical notations, the names of rulers and towns, and glyphs that indicate birth, accession to office, death and a few other events. I will translate Maya dates to the Christian calendar by the GMT correlation commonly used today.

My abbreviated history begins and ends like a tale of two cities: Tikal and Uaxactun where the two earliest known dates are recorded. The Tikal date falls in A.D. 288; that of Uaxactun, a short distance north of Tikal in 337. Such early monuments are badly eroded and yield no legible texts. Both these dates record the day Men, a day of evil portent, and it may be that the earliest stelae were funerary monuments.

The first dramatic event in Maya history occurred in 377, and is recorded both at Uaxactun and Tikal. Uaxactun Stela 5 is a portrait of a foreign warrior, holding a huge club and a dart thrower and wearing a feather headdress with a bird perched on top. In these early years the lowland Maya did not wear feather headdresses, and later, whenever they were invaded by highland

people, they called them "Parrots." Whether he was the king of Uaxactun or only a co-conspirator in a plot to take Tikal, it is hard to say. From the inscription on Stela 31 at Tikal, we learn that the king of Tikal, whom we call "Great-Paw," was killed and that a highlander took the throne. He is pictured on his stelae as wearing an elaborate feather-trimmed helmet, and seated with his feet on the ground. We call him "Curlsnout." His successor, "Stormy-Sky," is pictured on Stela 31 as a typical Maya (no feathers in his headdress) but on the narrow sides of the stela are shown two warriors in all their Mexican finery: feathered headgear, rectangular shields with the goggle-eyed image of Tlaloc, and the dart-thrower. It appears that the Mexican army had placed a native Maya back on the throne of Tikal. This incident had a profound influence on the development of Maya art, for the Maya later adopted the fashion of wearing feathered headgear, which brought curvilinear lines into their sculpture and taught them to depict motion.

Another crucial event occurred in 514. Shortly before, the government of Tikal fell to a ruler who had no royal pretensions. He is shown in modest attire holding a decorated staff. We call him "Kan Boar." For at least three of his stelae there seems to have been a companion monument, showing a figure facing him, wearing a cloak and holding a simple staff. These may have been messengers, sent to the chiefs of distant towns to inform them that they had been granted the titles of royalty. Simultaneously, Yaxchilan, a city on the river Usumacinta, Calakmul,

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\* Read 21 April 1983

in Campeche, and the city Caracol in British Honduras erected their first stelae in 514. The Classic Maya area had suddenly expanded to at least three times its former size.

This enterprise, however, was not immediately successful. For almost a century, no new monuments were erected in the provincial capitals, and few in central Peten. Apparently surrounding towns did not take kindly to the new arrangement and this meant constant wars with neighbors. Nevertheless, Maya histories, such as those in The Temple of Inscriptions at Palenque and on the roofcomb of Temple VI at Tikal, begin with the date 514. A dramatic recovery began in 613, seemingly due to a change in policy of the new merchant-kings. It seems that they began to marry off their daughters to the chiefs of neighboring provinces, thus giving regal status to their progeny and establishing family ties with them. Among the Maya, matrilineal descent seems to have been at least as important as patrilineage in determining social status, and at this time we find in outlying towns pairs of stelae, being erected—a man and a woman. After that, the incidence of stelae rises dramatically everywhere.

The phenomenal prosperity of the northern site Calakmul may have cut off Tikal's access to northern trade, but for whatever reason, we find the king of Tikal established at the site of Dos Pilas, near the headwaters of the Usumacinta. Yaxchilan at this time was ruled by a king we call "Shield Jaguar," a notable personality, whose name is mentioned at several sites on the Usumacinta; but his life is another story. The king of Tikal, whom we call "Lightning-Sky" had apparently married a local woman, and in 682 his son returns to Tikal and accedes to the throne to rule over its most prosperous period. On his early stelae he uses the "emblem" of his birthplace, later changing to the Emblem of Tikal. He is sometimes referred to as "Mooncomb" and sometimes called simply "Ruler A." We do not know the exact date of his

death, but he probably died shortly before 735, when another king succeeded him. He is probably buried in a grave found in the pyramid of Temple I of Tikal, and the lintels of this Temple depict his afterlife. On Lintel 3 of this Temple he is shown in the underworld, under the protection of a giant Jaguar, king of the earth. On Lintel 2 he has risen to the sky, with star and serpentine symbols above and below him. I mentioned this because it illustrates the two fundamental concepts of ancient Maya religion: Heaven and Earth, constantly alluded to in Yucatan even in early colonial times. Heaven was the abode of the illustrious dead, and the earth of the common folk. The Maya, like the nations of eastern Asia, were essentially ancestor worshippers.

In the ensuing years the art of the Maya becomes more and more flamboyant, with exaggerated detail and elaborate scroll-work, but in 795 we come to the brink of what scholars have called the "Maya Collapse." The city of Piedras Negras, located on the Usumacinta below Yaxchilan, a short distance above the gorge with the rapids that sportsmen today like to ride, was violently destroyed. Thrones were smashed and their fragments were thrown about; perishable buildings were burned. The king of Yaxchilan, perhaps foreseeing the catastrophe, had sent his wife and daughter into the interior, to Bonampak, where his daughter married, and on a magnificent mural in one of the buildings there, we see the couple seated on a throne, with a servant girl holding their baby before them. There are elaborate scenes of celebration. But Yaxchilan itself was doomed. How much longer it survived is uncertain. Its last inscription is on a small panel, poorly executed. Some scholars prefer to give it a very early date, but I do not concur. It speaks of a woman, and mentions battles with "Parrots," and I believe it was carved in the ninth century, after Yaxchilan was destroyed and the exodus began.

With the route along the Usumacinta closed to traffic, the Maya turned their attention eastward, and for a time the town of Machaquila, located on a river flowing into the Peten from British Honduras, flourished and in the first half of the ninth century was erecting magnificent stelae celebrating the lives of two of its rulers. Then it, too, was abandoned.

All major Maya cities were now cut off from outside contacts and were in serious trouble.

In A.D. 849, a meeting of four kings took place at Seibal, including the king of Seibal and the king of Tikal and two others of different physical appearance, with short noses, straight low foreheads and more prominent chins. It seems as if something like a peace treaty was being negotiated here. After that, we find a series of stelae of a new design, erected at ten-year intervals at various sites between Seibal and Tikal. These monuments are wider at the top than at the base. The principal figure stands on the ground, usually performing a gesture of divination. Above him in the sky are clouds, and riding on them are figures—on the first stela, a figure

of a warrior, on the others, two half-human and half-grotesque figures. One such monument was erected at Ucanal, northeast of Seibal, in the same ten-year period as the Seibal stelae. Another was found in Ixlu, in the lake region south of Tikal, erected 10 years later. A third at Tikal in 869. The king of Tikal had apparently returned home, but he did not stay long. Either he perished at Tikal, or moved with his retinue to a smaller town, Jimbal, where we find one of the last "Cloud-rider" stelae, the other, erected at the same time at Ixlu, in the lake region. Uaxactun also erected a stela at this time, with a beautiful script, but no figure.

Then in A.D. 889, both Uaxactun and Jimbal erect their last monuments. Both of them are small and poorly executed and both have only inscriptions. At the same time some sites on the northern and eastern periphery of central Peten, as well as at Seibal erected their last monuments. How long before the exodus began, we do not know. The forest took over. Conquest cannot explain this. Was it overcultivation of a fertile but thin soil? Was it climatic change? Pestilence? Overpopulation?