

Three Kings of Late Classic Tortuguero

MARC ZENDER &
STANLEY GUENTER

The site of Tortuguero lies to the west of Palenque, and is situated at the highly defensible Cerro de Macuspana of Central Tabasco, part of which towers above the site in a vertical wall known locally as the Gavilan Blanco. While mounds, platforms and terraces still survived to be recorded by archaeologists in the 1920s (Blom 1923, 1924; Blom and La Farge 1926-27), the site has since been devastated by both looters and local developers, and little today remains of Tortuguero's former grandeur. This is doubly unfortunate in that epigraphic data make it clear that Tortuguero played a significant role in the political history of the region (Schele and Grube 1994: 119-20), and that it enjoyed profound ties to Palenque, although the specifics of this relationship still remain unclear. Of the site's inscriptions, only two monuments (#6 and #8) can be considered at all well preserved, while the others are eroded to such a degree that they have long hindered the extraction of useful genealogical information.

Classic Tortuguero

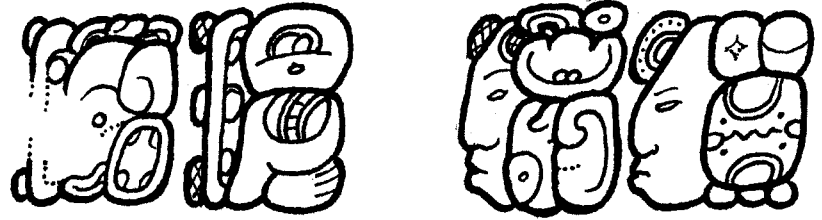
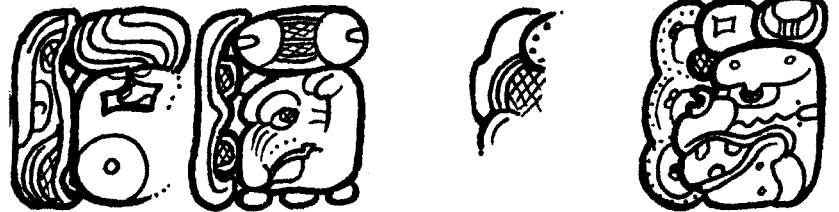


Fig. 1

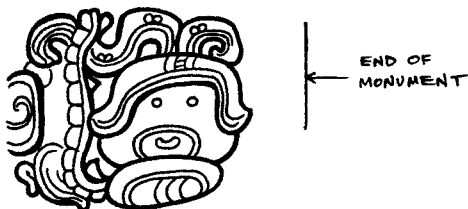
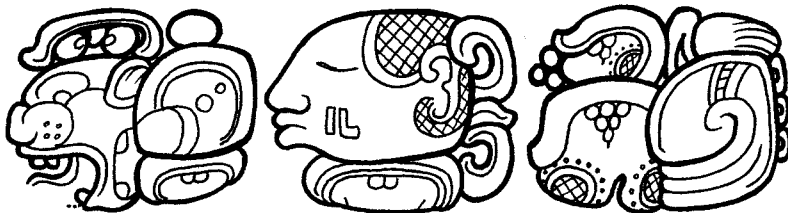


Recent reanalysis of the Tortuguero corpus, however, has allowed the recovery of much in the way of such information, including the names of two further kings of the site, and has greatly expanded our knowledge of Tortuguero throughout the seventh century A.D. This work was facilitated by Rebecca Perales of the Museo del Centro de Investigaciones de las Culturas Olmeca y Maya (CICOM) in Villahermosa, Tabasco, who allowed the senior author to

and Arthur Dunkelman of the Kislak Foundation for kindly providing them with access to detailed records (both photographic and archival) of the important Tortuguero Wooden Box text.

Previous to this analysis, the only substantive epigraphic information relevant to Tortuguero's Classic History could be traced to the reign of just one king: B'alam Ajaw (A.D. 612-679), conqueror of Comalcalco and the contemporary of K'inich Janahb' Pakal of Palenque. This expansionistic, illustrious monarch is mentioned on all of the surviving monuments and portable objects known to hail from this site. The concentration of Tortuguero's native historians on the reign of B'alam Ajaw, while obscuring the histories of both earlier and later rulers, nevertheless has provided us with a number of salient genealogical and historical facts concerning them.

Monument #6, dating to 668 A.D., is the single longest inscription from the site, and details the



make new drawings and to take photographs of the extant Tortuguero Monuments in July and August of 1998 and January of 1999. The authors would also like to thank Diana Fane of the Brooklyn Museum of Art

major events of B'alam Ajaw's life. Included in this history is a brief parentage statement for the king. Sadly, while the glyphs relating to his mother, Lady Yan, are perfectly preserved, the name of his father is one of the few glyphs on the monument that is almost entirely destroyed (fig. 1).

Monument #8, the actual sarcophagus-lid of B'alam Ajaw, although containing a perfectly preserved parentage statement on its side texts, is equally disappointing (fig. 2). While the name of the mother is once again intact, as is the possessed nominal phrase "the son of...", the scribe seems to have run out of room just after completing this collocation and failed to record the name of the father.

These unfortunate, frustrating accidents of history have long thwarted the reconstruction of a proper dynastic list for Tortuguero. We can be thankful, however, that one previously unrecognized clue to this mystery is preserved on the Tortuguero Wooden Box, an unprovenanced artifact now in the Kislak Foundation collection, Florida. While previous scholars (Coe 1974,Looper 1992) have noted that the box provides us with the name of B'alam Ajaw's successor, the presence of a rare possessed nominal construction intervening between this individual's name and the beginning of the next sentence has hitherto confounded analysis of the phrase and thereby obscured understanding of the text's genealogical significance.

After a record of the death of B'alam Ajaw, the text goes on to record the accession of one Ik' Muuy Muwahn on 9.12.7.1.19 (July 4, A.D. 679) (fig. 3).

Following this name are 3 glyph-blocks whose constituent signs can be read as **ye-te k'a-b'a-IL u-MAM**. While these signs have previously been taken as introducing a fourth, otherwise unknown historical personage into the events surrounding this accession (Looper 1992), the **ye-** and **-IL** signs are more likely to target a possessed nominal construction of the form y-et-k'ab'a-il u-mam, or "[Ik' Muuy Muwahn is] the et-k'ab'a of his grandfather". As Houston et al (1999) have noted, the rare compound noun et-k'ab'a (literally "property-name") — identified by them in the inscriptions of Bonampak and Piedras Negras — conveys the sense of "namesake" (cf. Yukatek /etk'ab'a/ "de un mismo nombre con otro", Barrera-Vasquez 1980: 160). Thus, Ik' Muuy Muwahn is clearly identified in the box text as "the namesake of his grandfather". If we assume, for the moment, that B'alam Ajaw was succeeded by his son (the predominant pattern in Maya succession throughout the Classic Period), then it stands to reason that the Ik' Muuy Muwahn of the Tortuguero Wooden Box ought to have had a grandfather of the same name, who should in turn have been the father of B'alam Ajaw. Here we may ask whether there is any other evidence to support such an interesting possibility.

If we return to the parentage statement on Monument #6 (fig. 1), we can see that a small portion of two glyphs remains in the name of B'alam Ajaw's father. The first is clearly part of an **IK'** logograph, whereas the second, while largely destroyed, contains a dotted circumference diagnostic of the **MUUY** logograph. Ample room also remains in the obliterated lower right of the glyph-block for the **MUWAHN** portion of this name. Hence, we feel confident in stating that B'alam Ajaw's father and son both carried the name Ik' Muuy Muwahn. This, then, confirms the information gleaned from the Tortuguero Wooden Box concerning the namesake of B'alam Ajaw's son, and allows us to reconstruct a dynastic sequence for seventh-century Tortuguero:

- Ik' Muuy Muwahn I**
(ruled in the early seventh-cent.)
- B'alam Ajaw**
(ruled from A.D. 644 - 679)
- Ik' Muuy Muwahn II**
(ruled from A.D. 679 - ???)

No known monuments date to the reign of Ik' Muuy Muwahn I. Apart from the previously mentioned references to him in the inscriptions of his son, however, there does seem to be one more reference to him in the incised upper text of Monument #8 (fig. 4). Note the clear **IK'**, **MUUY** and possible **yi** signs in the first glyph-block, and the zoomorphic head not inconsistent with **MUWAHN** in the second. Although Schele and Grube (1994) noted this example, they



Fig. 3

interpreted it as the name of B'alam Ajaw's successor. However, it is strange that the son would be mentioned prior to his own accession in a text so clearly dedicated to the early reign of his father. Furthermore, this reference is embedded within B'alam Ajaw's own title-string, without either chronological or discursive elements to set it apart from that name. As this structure is most common in parentage statements, it is therefore more likely that B'alam Ajaw here mentions his father, not his son.

While most other Tortuguero monuments can be dated to the reign of B'alam Ajaw, Monument #9, a sculptured column likely dating to 9.13.0.0.0 8 Ajaw 8 Wo (A.D. 692), is an important exception. Although terribly eroded, the inscription closes with a parentage statement implying that the current ruler was the son of B'alam Ajaw, quite possibly Ik' Muuy Muwahn II himself, and therefore the subject of this poorly-preserved text.

While Tortuguero's written history roughly covers the reign of B'alam Ajaw (A.D. 644-679), the reanalysis of important genealogical passages and little-studied (because poorly preserved) monuments has allowed us to expand that history to a significant degree. Biographical information on the rulers of Late Classic Tortuguero — with the exception of B'alam Ajaw — remains rather scant, but it has at least become possible to show that the royal throne of Tortuguero passed unbroken through at least three generations of the same family and that this dynasty encompassed most (if not all) of the seventh century A.D..

References Cited:

Barrera Vasquez, Alfredo

1980 *Diccionario Maya Cordemex*. Mexico: Ediciones Cordemex.

Blom, Frans

1923 *Las Ruinas del Tortuguero*. *Ethnos* 1(1): 77-78.
1924 *Notes from the Maya Area*. *American Anthropologist* 26(3): 403-413.

Blom, Frans and Oliver La Farge

1926-27 *Tribes and Temples*. 2 volumes. New Orleans: Tulane University.

Coe, Michael D.

1974 *A Carved Wooden Box from the Classic Maya Civilization*. *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque, Part II*, edited by Merle Greene Robertson, 51-58. Pebble Beach: Robert Louis Stevenson School.

Houston, Stephen, John Robertson and David Stuart

1999 *Quality and Quantity in Glyphic Nouns and Adjectives*. Paper presented at the European Mayanist Conference, September 1999, Copenhagen.

Looper, Matthew G.

1992 *A Reinterpretation of the Wooden Box from Tortuguero*. *Texas Notes on Pre-Columbian Art, Writing, and Culture*, No. 11. Austin: Center of the History and Art of Ancient American Culture, University of Texas.

Schele, Linda and Nikolai Grube

1994 *Tlaloc-Venus Warfare: The Peten Wars*. 8.17.0.0.0 - 9.15.13.0.0. In *Notebook for the XVIIIth Annual Workshop on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 79-167. Austin: Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin.

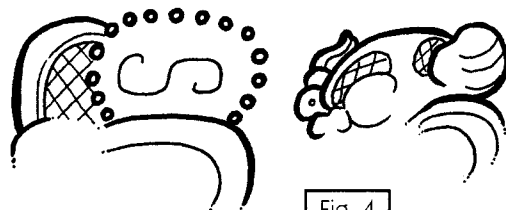


Fig. 4

Floods on the Gulf Coast Destroy Vera Cruz Archives

Jeffrey Wilkerson's research station in Gutierrez Zamora, Vera Cruz, suffered greatly in the record-breaking flooding of the Tecolutla River in October. The buildings are nearly all destroyed, and the library and archives of text and images gathered over thirty years, wiped out.

Books to help rebuild the library can be sent to Dr. S.J.K.

Wilkerson, c/o Mrs. Elsa de la Rosa, Institute for Cultural Ecology of the Tropics, 221 E. Van Buren, Harlingen, TX 78550. Ph: (956) 412-9250. Tax-deductible donations should be made out to the Institute for Cultural Ecology of the Tropics. Dr. Wilkerson can be reached in Mexico at 011-52-784-60189 (phone and fax). He is occasionally able to access his email, sjkwicet@yahoo.com.

PARI Newsletter Back Issues Available

Did you know that past issues of the PARI Newsletter are available for only \$10 each? Please specify issue number (or month and year of issue) desired, and email request with credit card number to Mary@dgreenecompany.com. You may also fax your request to (925) 284-8630, or mail request and a check to D. Greene & Co., 970 Dewing Ave., Suite 300, Lafayette, CA 94549.