

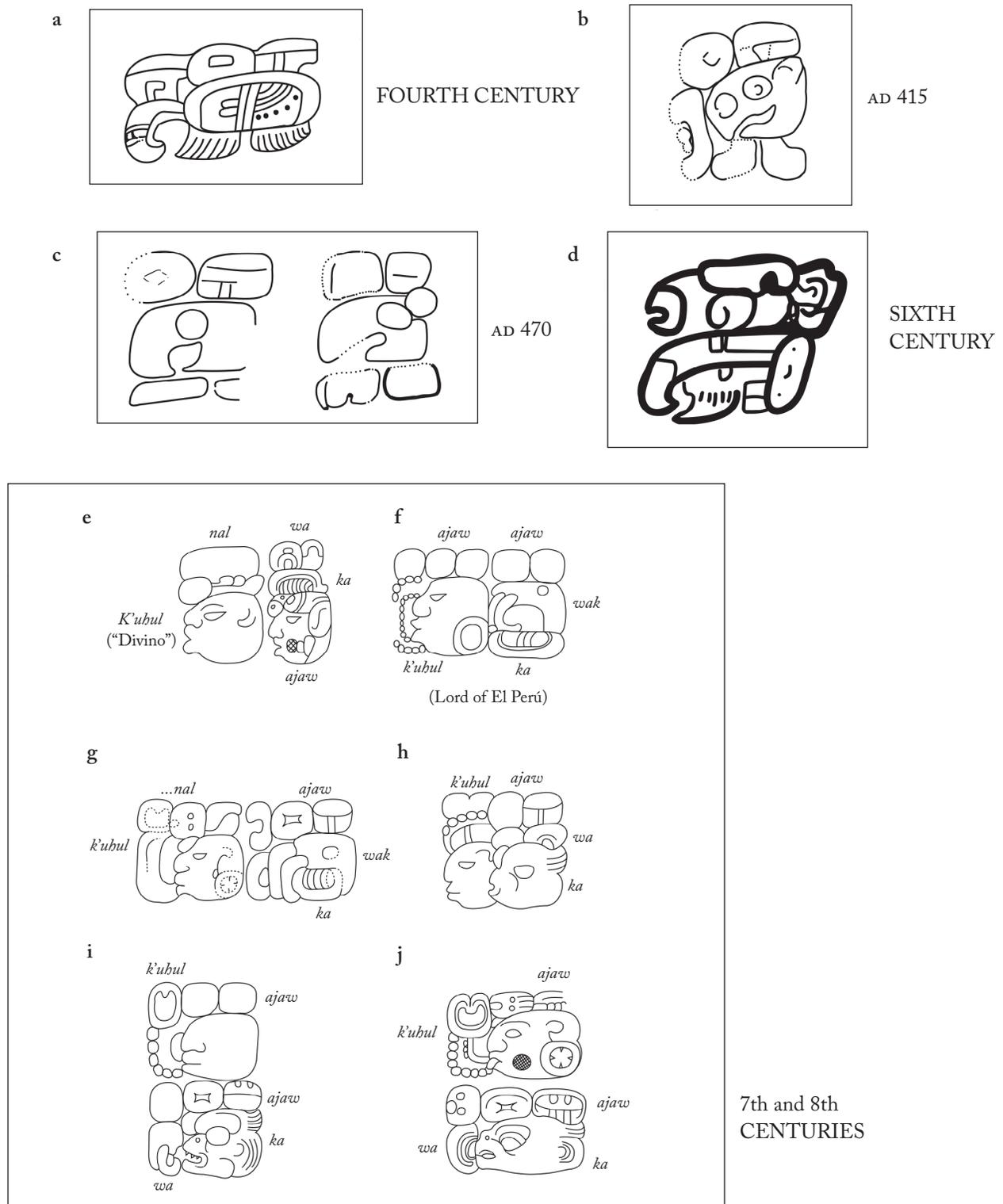
# MOUNTAIN OF MEMORIES: STRUCTURE M12-32 AT EL PERÚ

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*“La mémoire est l’avenir du passé”*  
Paul Valéry

The site of El Perú was discovered by chicle harvesters, one of whom evidently was thought of as Peruvian, hence the name. The ancient name of the city center was Waka’ as noted by epigrapher Simon Martin (2000) in his study of the text on Stela 34 at the site. Stanley Guenter (2005) has determined that *wak* is an old term for centipede in Classical Mayan script, one that named the royal dynasty and probably referenced a distinct centipede from the known term, *chapat* — perhaps a large and quite poisonous variety (*Scolopendra gigantea*) found today in the site zone (Figures 1 and 2). Guenter (2007) has proposed that the name of the royal capital was *Wak*, centipede, like the dynasty and suggested that the term Waka’, centipede water, merely qualifies the place as containing water, an addition found to other ancient place names in a world in which water was highly valued in the dry season. At the present time we have only the El Perú Stela 34 explicit glyphic reference to the place and that is Waka’, but on El Perú Stela 30 there is evidence that the portrayed king was standing on a living mountain monster with great centipedes emerging from its mouth. The best preserved of the two centipede heads on Stela 30 clearly shows the signature double fang of the centipede curving out of the top of the snout.

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**Figure 1.** (a-c) Possible emblem glyphs of the *Wak* kingdom; (e-j) El Perú emblem glyph variants (from Guenter 2004: 385); (d) probable emblem glyph of the *Wak* kingdom (from Guenter 2007: 21; digital version by Freidel, Escobedo and Meléndez).



Figure 2. Stela 30 from El Perú that depicts centipedes coming out of the mountain. It is possible that the image of a ruler was depicted on this monument, standing on the mentioned scene (Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala).

David Stuart (1986) determined that the name of mountain masks was the ancient Maya word for mountain, *witz*. In Classic Maya depictions kings and queens stand on baseline motifs that are places, including *witz* mountain masks that represent Effigy Mountains, pyramids and the temples on top of them (Stuart and Houston 1994). Typically *witz* masks are clefted at the top, representing portal places of emergence as in the case of the panel of the Foliated Cross at Palenque and Stela 32 at El Perú. The fragments of Stela 30, deliberately effaced and shattered in antiquity, were located just west of Structure M12-32, along with the fragments of other Late Classic stelae. We hypothesize that this pyramid was *Wak Witz*, a mountain of dynastic memories. Two other Late Classic stelae are broken and defaced by modern looters, but they remain still in place flanking the main western stairway of the same pyramid. Stela 24 depicted a ruler at the time of his death in AD 761. The mountain mask has two figures, probably ancestral kings, peering out of the eyes of the mountain. The king standing on the mountain mask carries a double-headed ceremonial bar that ends in centipede heads. Human faces emerge from the mouths of the centipedes. Karl Taube (2003) has shown that the night sun traveled through a cosmic centipede that spans the living earth. The famous Palenque sarcophagus of King K'inich Janaab Pakal II depicts him resurrecting as a youthful Maize God borne by the dawning sun out of the mouth of the cosmic centipede. So the *Wak Witz* was not only a mountain, but also a portal through which ancestral kings could travel the path to dawn and resurrection.

The idea of Pyramid Mountains as the abodes of royal ancestors was broadly shared in the Classic Maya world, as represented by the famous throne from the acropolis of Piedras Negras. While Stela 24 at El Perú depicts an adult, the paired Stela 25 on the other side of the staircase depicts a small figure. In light of the inscription declaring the death of the king on Stela 24, it is likely that Stela 25 depicts his young successor, and the two stelae together celebrate the resilience of the rulership (Figure 3). This is an appropriate celebration to be witnessed and memorialized by

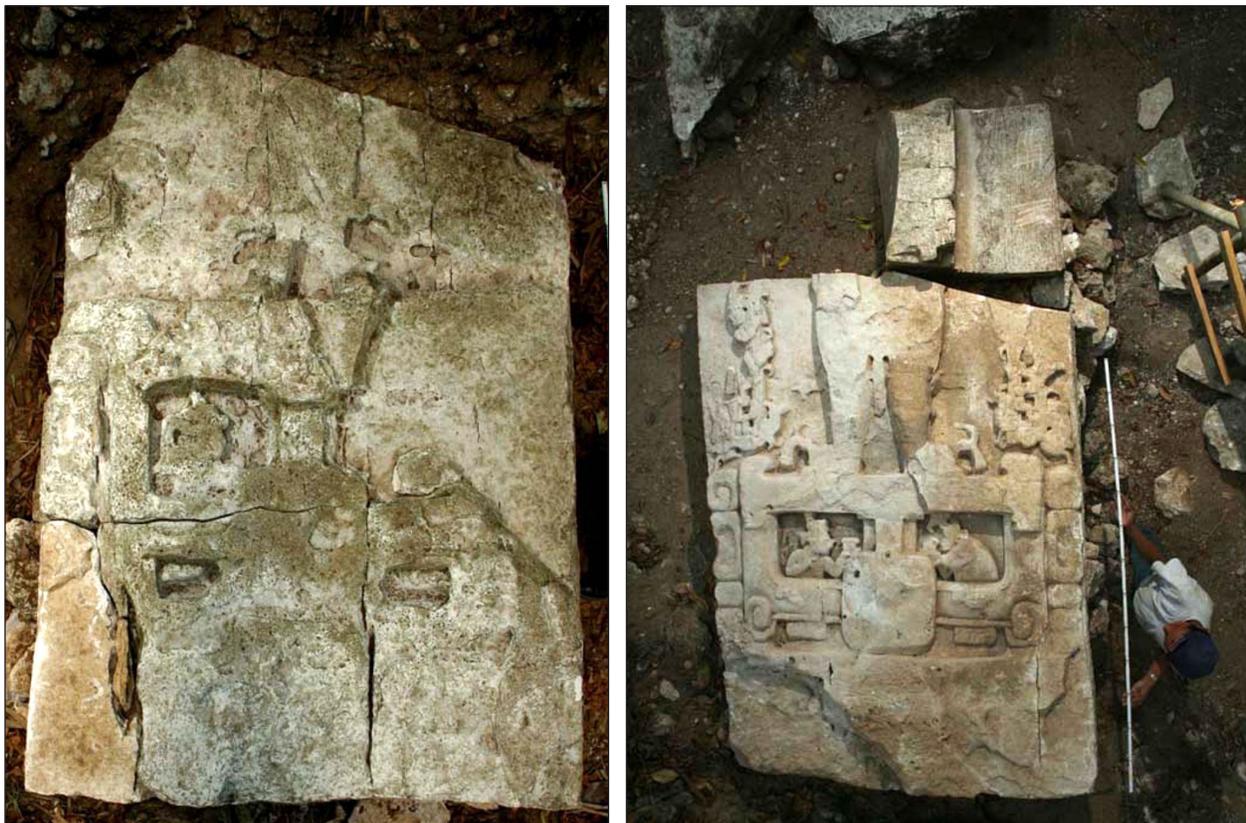


Figure 3. (a) Stela 24; (b) Stela 25 (courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Archaeological Project; Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala).



Figure 4. Discovery of Stela 40 from El Perú (courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Archaeological Project; Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala).

the deified ancestors dwelling in the pyramid mountain.

Structure M12-32 is a pyramid with conical shape, and modern looters are well aware that such pyramids often contain tombs. This pyramid was constructed with very stable mud-packed rubble, and in the 1960s looters tunneled deeply into the heart of it searching for tombs which they never found. Juan Carlos Pérez, an experienced tunnel specialist, supervised the recording of the stratigraphy in the looters' trenches, and then the stabilization of the largest and most dangerous of these. In the course of excavating the looters' spoil heap for material to use in the stabilization, Pérez uncovered the base of a previously unrecorded stela (Figure 4). Early Classic El Perú Stela 40 depicts a different basal creature, a Teotihuacan-style deity called the Butterfly War God with an owl in its mouth. Here the clefted mountain idea is symbolized by two triangles underneath the mask. Guenter (2005) has suggested that Stela 40 may refer to an Early Classic Wak king named Muwaan Bahlam not named on any stela at the site but mentioned on a looted vessel decorated with Butterfly War Gods. There is an owl in the mouth of the Butterfly War God on Stela 40, and another owl apparently decorates the base of El Perú Stela 23, which portrays an unknown king in AD 524. Both of these stelae are in the general vicinity of Structure M12-32. While the meaning of the Butterfly War God and Owl as places is unclear, the association of these images with Teotihuacan and with an Early Classic era of alliance between the Wak kingdom and Teotihuacanos makes sense as we will shortly show.

For three field seasons project co-director Héctor Escobedo and his team of Guatemalan archaeologists carried out stabilization and consolidation work on Structure M12-32. The massive loot hole on the upper eastern side of the pyramid was nicknamed "the cathedral" and took the entire 2005 field season to repair. At the end of the 2005 season Juan Carlos Meléndez excavated the base of the main western stairway and in 2006 he and Escobedo initiated a tunnel along the centerline of the building to discover the royal tomb that the looters had missed in their rampage through the pyramid (Figure 5). Their efforts were rewarded and the location was subject to police



Figure 5. Eastern view of Burial 37 from El Perú (courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Archaeological Project; Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala).



**Figure 6.** Masonry shrine discovered inside of Structure M12-32 (courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Archaeological Project; Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala).

and military security provided by the government. They discovered a masonry shrine inside the pyramid (Figure 6). The single room of the shrine had been packed with the same mud and rubble used to make the hearing of the pyramid around it.

When the rubble was removed, it was clear that the room had been blackened with fire before burial. The shrine was otherwise pristine and evidently had been buried immediately after construction. The shrine has a superior molding that is a *talud-tablero* design. This design is a hallmark of the architecture at Teotihuacan and suggests that the shrine was intended to invoke memories of that famous city and its fire shrines, called *wite' naah* in Maya inscriptions. The first mention of a *wite' naah* fire shrine in Maya history is on El Perú Stela 15, raised in AD 416. This stela celebrates the conquest of Wak by the warrior Sihyaj K'ahk' January 7, AD 378, one week before he conquered Tikal in a momentous campaign called by archaeologists the Early Classic Entrada. Sihyaj K'ahk' evidently placed in power a new Wak king named K'inich Bahlam I according to Stela 15. In AD 465 the grandson of K'inich Bahlam continued to celebrate the memory of the conqueror and raised a posthumous portrait of Sihyaj K'ahk', depicted as cradling a Teotihuacan-style fire bundle in his left arm and holding an Owl scepter in his right hand. The Owl scepter is probably a Spearthrower, an allusion to King Spearthrower Owl, overlord of Sihyaj K'ahk' and king of Teotihuacan according to David Stuart. Jesper Nielson and Christophe Helmke (2008) have cogently proposed that Spearthrower Owl, while likely an historical king of Teotihuacan, was also a toponym for a mountain at Teotihuacan, possibly the Moon Pyramid, as this contains sacrificial offerings of raptors. This might make sense of the owl heads in the baselines of El Perú Stelae 23 and 40 mentioned above.

The Early Classic kings of Waka' continued to remember and celebrate the time of Sihyaj K'ahk' into the sixth century. Stela 9 does not have a preserved glyphic date but stylistically it

dates to the sixth century. In the Terminal Classic period, after AD 800, people dragged large basal fragments of the stela to the terrace of another pyramid, Structure M13-1. Evidently they were not interested in the king portrayed on the stela, but rather in the mountain mask below his feet. This particular mask represents a fire mountain, with a zoomorphic fire glyph in the cleft of the forehead and images of the Sun God, K'inich Ajaw, emerging from the snakes emanating from the masks' mouth. The cult of K'inich Ajaw was perceived as equivalent to the cult of the *wite' naah* gods, particularly the goggle-eyed Tlaloc, lightning god (Taube 2004). A fine-line inscription next to the feet of the king on El Perú Stela 9 mentions a *wite' naah*. We think that this sacred fire mountain, a *K'abk' Witz* in Mayan, was also a *wite' naah*. The proximity of Stela 9 to Structure M13-1 suggests that the pyramid was an Early Classic *wite' naah* and Fire Mountain. Thus the main pyramids in the center of Waka' were effigy mountains, *Wak Witz* and *K'abk' Witz*, and both of them were repositories of collective memories charged with the power of ancestors. Here the city's rulers and people gathered to sustain themselves through profound change and crisis.

Returning to *Wak Witz*, Structure M12-32, Escobedo and Meléndez discovered a void underneath the buried shrine that turned out to be the royal tomb they were searching for, Burial 37, with the corbel vault stones collapsed down onto the bench on which the king lay. When they had removed the collapse from the surface, they could see that the tomb contained a single royal individual with his head facing east towards the rising sun. Despite the collapse of the roof the offerings were in place, although the collapse had destroyed most of the skeleton of the ruler. Escobedo discovered a large iron pyrite mosaic mirror next to the head of the ruler, and above that mirror, jade and Spondylus discs pierced for sewing onto cloth (Figure 7). We think this might have



**Figure 7.** Iron pyrite mosaic mirror with inlaid *Spondylus* beads (courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Archaeological Project; Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala; Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala).

been a Spangled Turban such as worn by scribes, artists, and sages. His discovery demonstrates that the artifacts remained in good context despite the roof collapse.

The basic pattern was cruciform, defined by a set of small black cups spanning the chest area horizontally, a set of red Spondylus shells running vertically down the body, the three jade jewels of the crown, a concentration of jade jewelry above the head, and two large plates with images painted on them, one at the head and the other at the feet. As in the case of the basal designs on stelae, the plate at the foot of the king declared where he was. The image is that of a being dubbed the Waterlily Monster, whose name as deciphered by David Stuart (2006) is K'an Naab Iximte', Precious (Yellow) Pool Maize Tree (Figure 8). We have rotated it to allow viewing, but it was placed so that the horizontal line was perpendicular to the body, forming a true base line for the king. The king was growing from this watery place as Maize, recalling the primary staple and the deity whose annual rebirth in the fields was the central metaphor of resurrection following death. Above his head on the second plate, however, was a further important qualification of his place. The image here is of a profile monster that has a cleft in its head marking it as a *witz* or mountain. The monster also has the distinctive double fangs of the centipede, symbol of the dynasty, Wak, so we think it is another depiction of *Wak Witz*, Centipede Mountain (Figure 9). The symbolism of Burial 37 is complex, but the *Wite' Naab*, a focus of Early Classic royal memory, and *Wak Witz*, a focus of Late Classic memory, are conjoined in this tomb and its shrine.

We think that this conjoining of sacred places was quite deliberate. Burial 37 was in fact situated under the staircase and not in the center of the pyramid where the looters had looked in vain. As we investigated the construction of the buried shrine, it became clear that it was never a free-standing building as there is only an inner facing to the back wall. Moreover, the masonry retaining wall that flanks the shrine on the northern side does not turn a corner but merely stops in the construction fill. We surmise that the shrine was constructed on a steep vertical face of construction fill inside of a broad trench cut through the stairway of a pyramid already in place. We deduce that the purpose of this trench was to expose bedrock so that the tomb housing Burial 37 could be put into place, the shrine built over it, and then the whole funeral scene reburied and the stairway rebuilt. In this reconstruction of events, the king buried in Structure M12-32 was not the original occupant. The pyramid was built in the Early Classic for another king whose tomb has yet to be discovered. We think that the king in Burial 37 was placed next to the earlier king in order to physically and spiritually link his reign and his memory to that king, clearly a famous and important ruler who merited the largest funerary pyramid in the city center.

We know that the Early Classic successors of King K'inich Bahlam I celebrated their affiliation with Sihyaj K'ahk' and the Teotihuacan-related New Order in Petén he introduced. But after the mid-sixth century the historical record falls silent at Waka' and no Wak dynasty stela is raised until AD 657. Stela 1, the first Late Classic stela known at the site, shows a king wearing the insignia of K'inich Bahlam II, namesake of K'inich Bahlam I and vassal to the most famous Late Classic ruler, the Snake king Yuknoom Ch'een the Great. This Hotun date, 657, marks the young king's first K'atun of life and also the first K'atun of reign of Yuknoom Ch'een. The Snake kings were deadly enemies to the New Order kings. Sometime between the mid-sixth century and the mid-seventh, Waka' was conquered and subjected by the Snake dynasty kings moving into Petén from their heartland in Campeche and Quintana Roo, Mexico. Stanley Guenter argues persuasively that Stela 15, celebrating the conquest of Sihyaj K'ahk', was shattered and dumped sometime in the mid-sixth century AD and then its pieces gathered and reset in the late eighth or early ninth century (Figure 10). He notes that the differential erosion on the carved surfaces could only result from the long exposure of some pieces face up while other pieces were preserved face down. We think this is a good hypothesis. The king in Burial 37 may date from this pivotal time of crisis and resilience in the Wak dynasty. Ceramicist Keith Eppich suggests that the offerings from Burial 37 contain elements that span the final phase of Early Classic types and the initial phase of Late Classic ones, dating to the mid-sixth century. He proposes that the unknown king in Burial 37 may be the last



Figure 8. Plate discovered below the body of a king buried in M12-32, with a scene of a waterlily monster (courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Archaeological Project; Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala; Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala).



Figure 9. Depiction of *wak witz* (centipede mountain) on a vessel discovered in Burial 37 (courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Archaeological Project; Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala; Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala).



Figure 10. Stela 15 from El Perú (courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Archaeological Project; Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala).



**Figure 11.** (a) Vessels from Burial 37; (b) vessels from Burial 8 (courtesy of the El Perú-Waka' Archaeological Project; Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala; Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala).

of the New Order kings of the dynasty. However, it is possible that the Burial 37 ruler is actually the first vassal king to the Snake dynasty, for as Eppich indicates there are important typological connections between Burial 37 and another royal tomb, Burial 8, resting place of a queen (Figure 11). David Lee discovered Burial 8 in Structure L11-38, a masonry structure he identifies as an audience room on the main courtyard of the royal palace. Excavating carved jade and shell regalia debris from the floor of the tomb next to the dais holding the body of the queen, Lee discovered a magnificent eighth-century royal jewel. This jewel is the basis for identifying the occupant as a queen. Lee also argues that this jewel dates the interment and that the queen in question is probably Lady Pakal who reigned in the late eighth century and was the last great queen of Waka'.

The dating of Burial 8 is currently problematic because we know that the tomb was reentered in the eighth century. There were some unequivocally eighth century offering vessels in the chamber but the skull and femora of the queen were removed as relics after the flesh had decayed, and much of the royal regalia had fallen or had been swept onto the narrow floor area next to the dais. The head area of the dais was covered with worked jade plaques. Freidel identified these as elements of a

plated battle helmet of a kind called *ko'haw* by the Maya. The *ko'haw* likely came from Teotihuacan and was introduced during the New Order in the Early Classic, but it was widely remembered and celebrated by later Classic royalty. It was on the basis of this identification, supported in principle by Renata García Moreno who has seen such a jade plaque helmet intact, that Freidel called this buried individual a warrior queen. There certainly was at least one warrior queen at Waka', Lady K'abel, and she reigned during the seventh century as the wife of King K'inich Bahlam II. Lady K'abel was a Snake dynasty princess who was the supreme warrior of Waka' and military governor for Yuknoom Ch'een the Great, but she is clearly either too early or too late to be the warrior queen in Burial 8. We suggest as one possibility that the queen in Burial 8 was a sixth-century Snake princess put in power by K'altuun Hix, a predecessor of Yuknoom Ch'een II, as part of a long-term military strategy by the Snake kings to encircle their primary rival, Tikal. Certainly K'altuun Hix began the establishment of royal roads south from his heartland on the eastern and western sides of the central karstic plateau and into Petén. The western royal road extended to La Corona by AD 520, when a daughter of K'altuun Hix was installed as a ruler there. We know this from the Dallas panel which depicts two queens and discusses three, all Snake princesses and rulers of La Corona, ancient Sak Nikte'. The daughter of King K'altuun Hix was Lady House Star, Ix Naah Ek, and she married the local king of Sak Nikte'. We propose that the queen in Burial 8 may have been another daughter of K'altuun Hix married to the local Wak dynasty king, the man in Burial 37. The ceramics are right for this proposal. We hope that AMS radiocarbon dating of the queen's remains will settle the matter of when she ruled. All of us agree that she was a famous ruler of Waka' and that like the king in Burial 37, she dwells in a mountain of memories. If we are right about the king, then his burial signals the collapse of the New Order kings of Waka', and the rise of the Late Classic kings who were celebrated vassals to the Snake dynasts, kings who dominated the lowland Maya world for more than a century.

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