



# The Nomenclature of La Corona Sculpture<sup>1</sup>

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For their relatively small size the ruins of La Corona, Guatemala, once had a remarkably large quantity of sculpted and inscribed monuments. The corpus of hieroglyphic texts known to be from La Corona in fact rivals and in some cases surpasses those of many larger, more powerful centers of the central Peten region. As is well known, looters removed a great many of these sculptures in the 1960s, leaving only meager remnants of once-imposing monuments scattered among the structures and plazas of the site. The looted stones themselves, of various types and styles, eventually made their way into museum and private collections around the world, and a great many others still remain unaccounted for. Recently, archaeological investigations at La Corona have unearthed a number of other sculptures, many clearly related to those removed from the ruins decades ago. As a result of this troubled history, the current archaeological project at La Corona today must confront a very complicated question: just how does one organize and designate these scattered bits and pieces of ancient sculpture, some now with good archaeological context but many of them without?

Assigning a consistent series of numbers and designations to the various looted and excavated sculptures raises a number of challenging problems. Many individual stones are components of much larger hieroglyphic stairways that were disturbed by the ancient Maya and reset into new constructions, often mixed with other elements. When looters came upon the site they of course took a great many of the well-preserved stones, discarding others on the ground nearby and leaving still others in situ. Organizing these disparate pieces into a logical and usable system has proved to be a surprisingly difficult challenge. In this *La Corona Note* we attempt to tackle the issue by describing the sculpture designation system as it currently stands.

## Labels and Categories

What factors go into determining a designation system for monuments and sculptures in the first place? At Maya sites where stelae and altars predominate, this issue seldom presents any great challenge. Of course the basic topological terms were established long ago by early explorers such as Alfred Maudslay and Teobert Maler, who developed the categories we commonly use today — stelae, altars, lintels, and so forth. Archaeological projects from the early twentieth century continued this trend with little modification. When the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions was first formulated in the early 1970s, Ian Graham laid the groundwork for a more systematic set of designation categories (Graham 1975:25). He was well aware that certain sites presented unusual, localized patterns and forms that made widespread consistency difficult to maintain. At Tonina, for example, the vast array of sculptures and pieces led to the formation of a simple two-part system consisting of “Monuments” and “Fragments,” both of which ignore any functional or situational differences such as stelae, panels, and so on (that Tonina nomenclature system still does not accommodate the huge number of stucco reliefs and fragments). In the case of Piedras Negras,

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<sup>1</sup> The *La Corona Notes* series disseminates the latest results and interpretations resulting from research on the Classic Maya center of La Corona in northern Peten, Guatemala. In the spirit of the *Copan Notes*, this series is meant to produce short informal papers by project members. Considering the usual lag between discovery and publication, *La Corona Notes* provides a venue to rapidly circulate ideas, decipherments, or discoveries deemed interesting and useful to a wider public. This series will publish new notes as they are produced and in no particular order. For questions or comments, please email us at: [lacorona.project@gmail.com](mailto:lacorona.project@gmail.com).

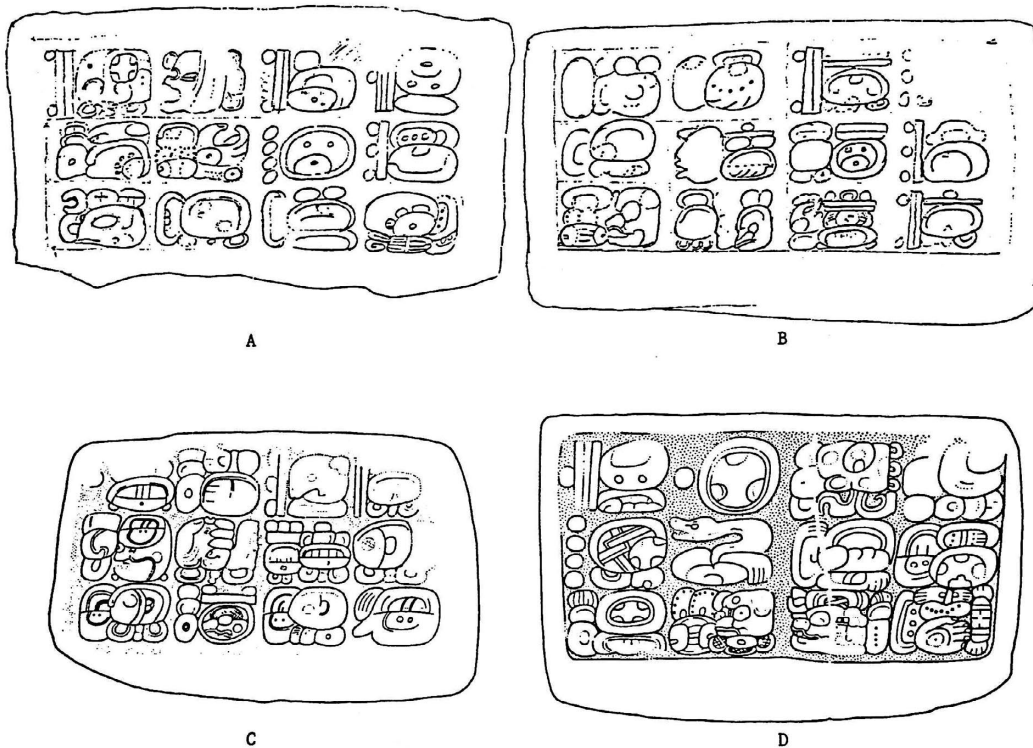
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the Corpus also had to introduce a new category of "Rock Sculpture (RSc.," that was not included in Graham's original list but was applicable to other sites as well (Stuart and Graham 2003:11). It seems likely that other new categories will be defined in the future for still other sites, as systems of sculpture designation are designed to reflect particular local circumstances and situations. Heavily looted sites such as La Corona add other layers of complexity that were never properly considered by early archaeologists, nor even by

Graham as he was setting out his initial system for the Corpus program.

Some of these challenges began to emerge by the late 1970s, when Peter Mathews first began the difficult process of gathering and systematically numbering the scattered pieces of related sculpture that had begun to appear in collections and art galleries in the 1960s. Mathews was the first to name their unknown point of origin as "Site Q" (Figure 1). His source material consisted of the small number of stones that had

**SITE 'Q': Glyphic Panels A-D.**



**A. COLLECTIONS:** Oak Bluffs, Mass. Panel in the collection of Thomas Ford.  
(Drawing by Ian Graham)

**B. COLLECTIONS:** Oak Bluffs, Mass. Panel in the collection of Thomas Ford.  
(Drawing by Ian Graham)

**C. COLLECTIONS:** Mexico City. Panel in the collection of Rina Lazo.  
(Sketch by Ian Graham)

**D. COLLECTIONS:** Sydney, Australia. Panel in the collection of Robert Shaw.  
(Drawing by Peter Mathews)

**Figure 1.** An example of the original Site Q designation system ("Glyphic Panels") developed by Peter Mathews.

made their way into art publications some years before (Boucher 1966; Coe 1973), as well as Ian Graham's extensive Corpus archive at the Peabody Museum at Harvard, where Mathews worked for several years. His designations appeared mostly in unpublished notes, but they made their way into the files and archives of various colleagues and therefore became widely used for a time. Later, in an on-line presentation, Mathews compiled and presented a list of "Site Q Sculptures" with slight modifications here and there (Mathews 1998).

Among the labels Mathews developed for the Site Q stones were two categories called "Glyphic Panels" and "Ballplayer Panels." This was a simple way to give some system to the stones that were then known, but in retrospect there were inevitable problems. His "Glyphic Panel 1" is clearly from La Corona, but "Glyphic Panel 2" is probably not (at least there is no evidence of an attribution as yet). It also became increasingly clear that the supposed "panels" were in fact once larger and heavier blocks (probably from hieroglyphic steps or stairways) that had been sawn and thinned by

looters for easier transportation. Moreover, many of the so-called "Ballplayer Panels" almost surely originated from the same stairway as several of the "Glyphic Panels," meaning they were once part of a single monument. Despite these issues, this Site Q designation system was widely used for nearly two decades in one form or another.

When the ruins of La Corona were first systematically explored in 1997 by Graham and Stuart, several stelae and altars were found and given numbers (Graham 1997, 2010; Stuart 2001). These were Stelae 1 and 2 and Altars 1 through 4, all of which were discovered in situ, mostly concentrated in the main plaza. Altar 4, one of the latest sculptures of La Corona, was first found in many scattered fragments but reconstructed during that initial visit (Figure 2; an additional piece of Altar 4 was discovered by Bruce Love in 2011). Also discovered at that time were a number of small inscribed slabs near the south side of the plaza, which clearly were the facing stones of a stairway. These were given the collective designation of Hieroglyphic Stairway 1, and many



**Figure 2.** La Corona Altar 2 as reconstructed in 1997. A fragment corresponding to the gap at lower right was found in 2011. Photograph by David Stuart.



**Figure 3.** Blocks from La Corona Hieroglyphic Stairway 1 in 1997. Photograph by David Stuart.

more badly eroded blocks have been recovered since (Figure 3).

Subsequent explorations at La Corona led to the discovery of more sculptures. The most important find came in 2005, with Canuto's

discovery of what soon came to be called Panel 1 — a perfectly preserved monument in two sections, recounting many details of La Corona's local history and the life of the ruler known as *K'inich ? Yook* (Figures 4 and 5). With the beginnings of



**Figure 4.** Marcello Canuto with La Corona Panel 1 in 2005.

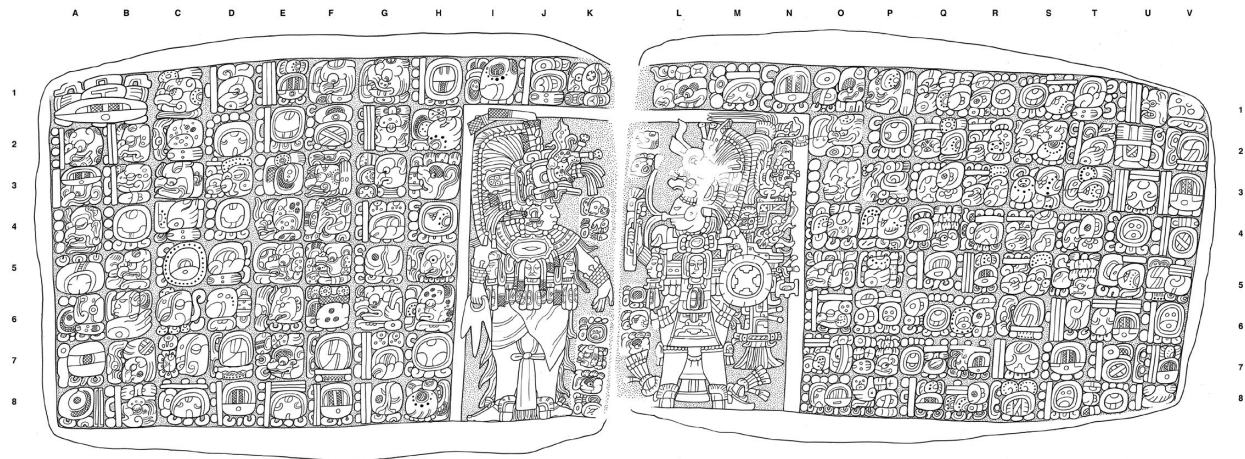


Figure 5. La Corona Panel 1. Drawing by David Stuart.

systematic excavations in 2006, still more pieces came to light on the surface of the ruins, including several blocks that were identical in style and form to the “glyphic panels” described by Mathews. With the La Corona origin of the Site Q stones firmly established, Stuart began to develop a new numbering system in close consultation with Canuto and Barrientos. It seemed clear enough that looters had come across at least two other hieroglyphic stairways and removed many of their blocks. Stuart tentatively grouped these together as “Hieroglyphic Stairway 2” (or “Set A”) and “Hieroglyphic Stairway 3” (“Set B”), since they were obviously distinct monuments, carved in very different styles and at different times. Within these sets, Stuart numbered the blocks according to their sequence of discovery (more

or less) uniting the looted Site Q materials with those from La Corona. The proper order of the inscribed blocks remained difficult to know, since many were clearly still missing and few actually articulated with one another. Stuart’s provisional system was never widely published or circulated, but it did appear in some sources in the last few years.

The discovery in 2012 of twenty-two inscribed blocks on or near the stairway of Structure 13R-10 (Ponce 2014; Ponce and Cajas 2013) now forces us to reevaluate these earlier systems (Figures 6 and 7). This monument — an archaeologically documented stairway consisting of inscribed blocks — by all rights deserved the designation “Hieroglyphic Stairway 2.” Moreover, it immediately was apparent that the ancient



Figure 6. The in situ portion of Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, soon after its discovery in 2012



**Figure 7.** Jocelyn Ponce and Marcello Canuto with the in situ portion of Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, soon after its discovery in 2012. Photograph courtesy of PACUNAM.

Maya had constructed the stairway using blocks they themselves had removed from other earlier monuments, intentionally displaying them in a mixed (and textually incomprehensible) arrangement. Some show clear connections to the “Glyphic Panels” of the old Site Q system, whereas others are from previously unknown styles. In a supreme irony, the ancient Maya who built the final phase of the Structure 13R-10 staircase used stones they had looted from other La Corona monuments.

At first glance it would be natural to assume that *all* of the small “Glyphic Panels” that made their way into the art market in the 1960s came from this very same location. There is no doubt that many, if not most, in fact did, and were once part of the monument we today call Hieroglyphic Stairway 2. But there also is reason to be cautious. While many of the so-called “Set A” stones were found in direct association with Structure 13R-10, one of them (Element 21) was found a good distance away, in the central plaza. We therefore hesitate to assume that all of the Site Q glyphic stones were part of this one archaeologically documented space; it remains possible that the ancient Maya took some of its parts from earlier monuments but left others. Given the ambiguities, it is best that the Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 designation be reserved

only for the stones found in direct association with Structure 13R-10.

### Elements

In the case of La Corona we choose to introduce yet another category, “Element.” This was necessary in order to create a systematic arrangement out of an inherently messy and challenging situation, where many inscribed pieces lack any proper archaeological context, but which nevertheless have clear ties to excavated stones that do. “Element” seems a neutral term for designating blocks or sections of other monuments (stairways for example) where their original placement remains unclear.

Using the category label “Element” reflects the need for a flexible and neutral-sounding term that could accommodate the scattered nature of looted pieces and could also be of use in designating related pieces excavated at the site. “Elements” is not a completely boundless category in terms of its scope, however. We use it as a means of designating any small portable sculptures, mostly rectangular blocks from incomplete sets that do not appear in primary context. This very general description encompasses smaller categories: (1) the looted stones that are today mostly in various



**Figure 8.** Blocks 9, 10, and 11 of La Corona, Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 (Elements 37, 38, and 39). Photographs by David Stuart.

public and private collections, (2) the many stones that the ancient Maya themselves removed from other locales and placed in secondary context, principally in and around Structure 13R-10.

A case study might help to make some sense of the complexities — or at least reveal them. Let us look in particular at Blocks 9, 10, and 11 of Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, all discovered side by side (Figure 8). These three stones clearly do not belong together as arranged. Blocks 9 and 11 are very similar, and in fact once formed part of another hieroglyphic stairway we designate as Set A, characterized by an arrangement of twelve (3 x 4) glyph blocks in shallow relief. The intervening Block 10 is of another style and was part of another group called Set B, all of which once formed yet another stairway at La Corona. To reiterate, the ancient Maya “looted” those original monuments in order to construct HS 2 at some late point in La Corona’s history, intentionally placing the stones in nonsensical order.

The texts on Blocks 9 and 11 are contiguous, and together match a looted block that now resides in the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. It is impossible to designate the Peabody block as “part” of Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, however. All three stones are therefore designated with neutral “Element” numbers that remove them from these problematic settings (a reset ancient stairway in one case, and a museum storeroom in another) and allow them to be reconstituted with each other and with other similarly designated stones. In fact, as we will present in a later *La Corona Note*, the seven blocks known as Elements 44, 11, 37, 39, 9, 49, and 50 form a sequence from an earlier “proto”-stairway where all of the “Set A” blocks evidently originated.

## Conclusions

The discovery of Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 at La Corona has forced us to reconsider the wider nomenclature system for the site’s monuments and inscriptions. First, we can now be confident in situating the former Site Q panels with regard to La Corona and its archaeology, especially with reference to Structure 13R-10. It is probable that many if not all of the blocks looted half a century ago originated from that location, taken from a large staircase that the ancient Maya had constructed using blocks that they in turn had “looted” from other buildings and stairways.

In developing the current system we have tried to conform as much as possible to the standards set by earlier archaeological projects, and especially to the guidelines of the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions Program. It is obvious, however, that every archaeological site presents its own special nonconformities, making perfect adherence to any pre-existing system an unrealistic ideal. Designation systems that are designed for any single site’s monuments must of course conform to local realities and circumstances. We have also strived to follow some general designation patterns found in Mathews’ original “Site Q” compilations. For instance, the numeration sequence of Elements follows his original numbering order of “Glyphic Panels” and “Ballplayer Panels.”

The current numbering may well undergo minor revisions as other discoveries are made, and flexibility in developing such a system is always a good thing. But we are confident that the nomenclature of the La Corona monuments is finally finding some order after too many years of chaos and inconsistency.

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**Appendix: A Working Register of La Corona Inscriptions\***

<u>Current designation</u>	<u>Previous name (source)</u>	<u>Diagnostics</u>
Stela 1		located in situ, 1997
Stela 2		located in situ, 1997
Altar 1		located in situ, 1997
Altar 2		located in situ, 1997
Altar 3		located in situ, 1997
Altar 4		located in situ, 1997
Panel 1 (2 parts)		located in situ, 2005
Panel 2 (2 parts)	Site Q Panel 2a/Deletaille	5 Cimi 9 Zac
Site Q Panel 2b/K4677		
Panel 3 (inc.)	Site Q Panel 4/K5865	
Site Q Panel 1/Grolier		
Panel 4	Site Q Stela 5	
Panel 5	Panel 7 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2008</i> )	located on-site, 2006
Panel 6	Site Q Altar 1	
H.S. 1, Blocks 1-72		
H.S. 2, Blocks 1-12	Elements 29-40	located in situ, 2012
Column 1		located in situ, 2008
Column 2		located in situ, 2008
Column 3		located in situ, 2008

\* Note: Mathews' original designation "Glyphic Panels" applied to a total of ten stone blocks. Two of these, numbered 2 and 10, form a separate group and are apparently not from La Corona. The remainder were part of the group here designated as "Set A."



<u>Current designation</u>	<u>Previous name (source)</u>	<u>Diagnostics</u>
Element 01	Site Q Glyphic Panel 1	11 Pictuns; Set B
Element 02	Site Q Glyphic Panel 3	17 Muan; Set B
Element 03	Site Q Glyphic Panel 4	11 Imix; Set B
Element 04	Site Q Glyphic Panel 5	4 Manik; Set B
Element 05	Site Q Glyphic Panel 6	3 Cauac; Set B
Element 06	Site Q Glyphic Panel 7	5 Men; Set B
Element 07	Site Q Glyphic Panel 8	13 Kan; Set B
Element 08	Site Q Glyphic Panel 9	15 Zac; Set B
Element 09	Site Q Glyphic Panel A	12 Kayab; Set A
Element 10	Site Q Glyphic Panel B	10 Ahau; Set A
Element 11	Site Q Glyphic Panel C	8 Xul; Set A
Element 12	Site Q Glyphic Panel D	1 Chuen; Set A
Element 13	Site Q Ballplayer Panel 1	
Element 14	Site Q Ballplayer Panel 2	
Element 15	Site Q Ballplayer Panel 3	
Element 16	Site Q Ballplayer Panel 4	
Element 17	Site Q Ballplayer Panel 5	
Element 18	Site Q Ballplayer Panel 6	
Element 19	Site Q Panel 3 (aka 5); K5864	male-female pair
Element 20	Site Q Glyphic Panel 11	Set B
Element 21	H.S. 2 Block VII ( <i>PRALC Informe 2008</i> )	located on-site, 2006
Element 22	H.S. 2 Block V ( <i>PRALC Informe 2008</i> ); K9126	4 Muan; Set A
Element 23	H.S. 2 Block VIII ( <i>PRALC Informe 2008</i> ); K9127	17- <b>la-ta</b> ; Set A
Element 24	H.S. 2 Block VI ( <i>PRALC Informe 2008</i> ); K9128	9 Chicchan; Set A
Element 25	H.S. 2 Block XV ( <i>Matteo 2010</i> )	<b>ya-na-bi-la</b> ; Set B
Element 26	H.S. A Block 09 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2012</i> )	3 Xul; Set A
Element 27	H.S. A Block 10 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2012</i> )	<i>bakab</i> ; Set A
Element 28	H.S. 1 Block XIV ( <i>PRALC Informe 2008</i> )	located on-site, 2008
Element 29	H.S. 2 Block 01	Set B
Element 30	H.S. 2 Block 02	standing lord
Element 31	H.S. 2 Block 03	enthroned woman
Element 32	H.S. 2 Block 04	death event; Set B
Element 33	H.S. 2 Block 05	13 bak'tun reference
Element 34	H.S. 2 Block 06	throne and tribute scene
Element 35	H.S. 2 Block 07	paired with Element 36
Element 36	H.S. 2 Block 08	paired with Element 35
Element 37	H.S. 2 Block 09	arrival event; Set A
Element 38	H.S. 2 Block 10	capture event; Set B
Element 39	H.S. 2 Block 11	feather-flute dance; Set A
Element 40	H.S. 2 Block 12	unfinished glyphs
Element 41	H.S. A Block 11 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2012</i> )	9 Lamat; Set A
Element 42	H.S. A Block 12 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2012</i> )	5 k'atun ajaw; Set A
Element 43	H.S. A Block 13 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2012</i> )	9 Chuen; Set A
Element 44	H.S. A Block 14 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2012</i> )	12 Ahau; Set A
Element 45	H.S. A Block 15 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2012</i> )	15 Mac; Set A
Element 46	H.S. A Block 16 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2012</i> )	13 coefficient; Set A
Element 47	H.S. A Block 17 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2012</i> )	9.18 DN; Set A
Element 48	H.S. A Block 18 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2012</i> )	7 Ahau; Set A
Element 49	H.S. A Block 19 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2012</i> )	8 Caban; Set A
Element 50	H.S. 2 Block 13 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2012</i> )	13 Chen; Set A
Element 51		located in fill, 2011
Element 52		located in fill, 2012
Element 53	described by Boot (2011)	
Element 54	Panel 6 ( <i>PRALC Informe 2008</i> )	carcass