

ELIMINATING THE SACRED KINGS AND REINSTATING THE GODS: SOME GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE SECOND FIELD SEASON AT EL PERÚ-WAKA', PETÉN

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Keywords: Maya archaeology, Guatemala, Petén, El Perú-Waka', excavations, monuments, rulers, epigraphic readings, Early Classic period, Late Classic period, Terminal Classic period

El Perú, called *Waka'* in ancient times, revealed itself as an important Classic Maya center thanks to the documentation of its carved monuments, carried out by Ian Graham and his colleagues (Graham 1971:61; 1988). In the course of our previous visits to the site to outline the current El Perú-*Waka'* Archaeological Project, we were struck by the evident state of disturbance and fragmentation of those monuments (Freidel and Escobedo 2002: 10-11). Part of such destruction was clearly recent, caused by looters who cut the carved surfaces to facilitate their transportation and further sale in the illegal market. But after two seasons of efforts aimed at assembling the fragments of the plaza monuments, and having excavated in areas adjacent to several stelae, it was clear that modern looters found the monuments already broken and frequently so scattered around the site, that large pieces with a weight of tons went missing.

Our ongoing research shows that part of such destruction took place during the Late Classic or Terminal Classic periods. Therefore, the historical images of kings and queens had not merely suffered natural fragmentation and decay, but rather, they had been symbolically "killed". Besides, our investigations suggest that some monument fragments were relocated with altars or low platforms built around them. Those altars, used for rituals around the broken and eroded sculptures, recall the cult after the Conquest of this kind of monuments as seats for the deities, and seem to have been built by persons who left no historic trace of their identity. Their scarce and fragmentary artistic works suggest that they lived during the Terminal Classic period, following the vanishing of the royal court of *Waka'*.

The end of the Classic period in the Central Lowlands is usually marked by the end of divine royalty. In spite of the insistent argument that Maya civilization did not in fact collapse at the end of the Classic period, Demarest, Rice and Rice (2004:572) have recently come to the conclusion that "that which vanished was the political system in force from the Late Preclassic to the Late Classic period, based on divine royalty, and the extravagant symbolic system it generated". The smashing and scattering of the stelae in *Waka'* are witness to the violent and decisive effort of a group of people to stress the end of that political system. Operations conducted in 2004 come to reinforce the preliminary observations of our 2003 first season, in the sense that the final centuries of occupation have left behind a rich and complex record of such events. But before we continue examining the end of *Waka'*, we wish to present a summary of a different type of information collected.

According to the evidence of the two field seasons conducted at the site, it may be stated that *Waka'* was established around the end of the Late Preclassic period as a large ceremonial center, and that the occupation of the settlement area continued up to the Terminal Classic period. Michelle Rich discovered a Terminal Preclassic cache of vessels sealed in the construction refill on one summit of the Acropolis Temple at the plaza (see Rich, this volume). This cache proves categorically that the transformation of this natural hill into a pyramid took place in this time span. The Temple of the Acropolis transformed *Waka's* most elevated area into three massive pyramids, which clearly became the ritual core of the community.

Excavations conducted by Fabiola Quiroa and Griselda Pérez in the satellite settlement of Chakah come also to confirm the foundation of other sites in the area during the Late Preclassic period (see Quiroa and Pérez, this volume). Chakah's localization, south of *Waka'*, on a logical elevated route towards the San Pedro Mártir River, suggests that this site served as a station between *Waka'* and other major capitals of Petén since very early in time. The discovery in Chakah of a Late Classic vessel with inscriptions that in Stanley Guenter's view (personal communication 2004) included the name of a king from El Zotz, reinforces this possibility. El Zotz was located east of *Waka'*, on a possible route that communicated the San Pedro Mártir River with Tikal.

The most recent investigations on the epigraphy and iconography of the stelae, conducted by Guenter and Freidel during the 2004 season, outline the important bonds that existed between the *Waka'* rulers and the distant centers of power, Teotihuacan and Tikal included, during the Early Classic period, and Calakmul, during the Late Classic period. David Stuart (2000) observed that Stela 15, a full hieroglyphic monument, celebrated the arrival in *Waka'* of the Teotihuacan warrior *Siyaj K'ahk'* in January of 378 AD, hardly a few days prior to his conquest of Tikal when the local king was overthrown. A subsequent study of Stela 15 confirms that the monument refers to events that involved the local king, *K'inich B'ahlam*, with some ceremony held at a place called *Wi-Te'*, probably a *Wi-Te'-Na*. According to Karl Taube and David Stuart (personal communication, 2004), this kind of building, associated with the Maya kings affiliated to Teotihuacan, may have been a shrine to worship fire. Stela 15 shows a series of short side texts that mention the kings that preceded *K'inich B'ahlam*, as well as his successor, the monument's patron. These texts are framing the crucial event of the arrival of *Siyaj K'ahk'* and outline his historical significance with respect to the subsequent rulers.

Stela 16, a monument located in the same plaza where Stela 15 was, represents a male wearing a Teotihuacan costume. Freidel observed that this individual was carrying a bundle in his left arm, similar to a fire bundle. In his right hand he carried a scepter with the head of an owl, perhaps a symbol of the *Dart-Throwing Owl*, the sovereign of *Siyaj K'ahk'*. Guenter (personal communication, 2004), later argued that Stela 16 may have been a posthumous portrait of *Siyaj K'ahk'*, dedicated by a successor of *K'inich B'ahlam* over 70 years after the arrival of the Teotihuacan warrior to *Wakah'*. The last rulers of *Wakah'* were fully aware of the position they occupied in Maya history, a place they had achieved thanks to *K'inich B'ahlam*, who played a role similar to that of *Yax K'uk' Mo'* in Copan.

The archaeological exposure of the Early Classic occupation in *Waka'* is still limited, in spite of the works accomplished by Juan Carlos Meléndez, who has brought to light a

range masonry structure of that period buried under one of the buildings of the Late Classic Ballgame (see Lee, Piehl and Meléndez, this volume).

The reconnaissance of another satellite site north of *Waka'*, conducted by Marco Tulio Alvarado and Edwin Romero, revealed Chinautla Polychrome pottery, showing that the general area was still occupied close to the Spanish arrival. The presence of satellite sites at the northern and southern borders of *Waka'* is consistent with the results of the informal reconnaissance by Roan Balas McNab around La Corona, approximately 20 km north. Balas McNab (personal communication, 2004), reported several sites with monumental architecture located at the edges adjacent to lagoons in that area, and approximately 8 km south of *Waka'*. Perhaps the intimate political connections between Calakmul, *Sak Nikte'* and *Waka'*, implicit in the epigraphic information of the VII and VIII centuries, may be echoing the presence of an important land route that connected Calakmul with western Central Petén. In the VII century, a namesake of king *K'inich B'ahlam*, took hold of the scepter of the *K'awiil* of *Waka'* while he was in Calakmul, under the auspices of *Yuknoom Ch'een* "the Great". This second *K'inich B'ahlam* and his wife, the lady *K'abi'il*, a *kaloomte'* and princess of Calakmul, jointly dedicated at least four stelae, more than any other royal couple in *Waka'*, and they evidently ruled during the second golden age of the site. Their successor, king *B'ahlam Tzam*, was defeated by the Tikal ruler *Yik'in Chan K'awiil* in 743 AD. One of the two known stelae of this king had been so remarkably fragmented and scattered in ancient times, that Ian Graham classified its fragments as two separate monuments, Stelae 29 and 31.

Recent publications summarized in the new book edited by Demarest, Rice and Rice (2004), attest the variety and complexity of this time of "collapse" in the Central Lowlands. By the end of the VIII century, *Waka'* conclusively witnessed the perpetuation of the court and of the royal dynasty at least half a century after Tikal defeated *B'ahlam Tzam*.

The epigraphic record of this period is sporadic and problematic. There was at least one king whose name remains unknown for now, who ruled after the defeat of 743 AD following a period of possible domination of Tikal over *Waka'*; he tried to restore diplomatic relationships with Calakmul by marrying a woman named *Pakal*, who used the emblem glyph of the "bat" that identified the last rulers of Calakmul. This information was recorded on Stela 32, which stands prominently by Stelae 33 and 34, monuments that corresponded to the reign of *K'inich B'ahlam*, who in the VII century was an ally and a vassal of King *Yuknoom Ch'een* "the Great", of Calakmul. A fragment of the text on one of the sides of Stela 32 refers to *K'inich B'ahlam*. In this way, the last king portrayed in Stela 32 attempted to restore the history of *Waka'* after they were defeated by Tikal, by retrospectively referring to the kings that granted the most prestige to the local dynasty.

Guenter (personal communication, 2004), believes that the best interpretation of the difficult contents of the texts suggests that a last historic ruler, *Aj Yax Chow Pat*, was enthroned at *Waka'* in 801 AD, as shown in Stela 38, the associated altar, and Stela 39, monuments located at the Northwestern Plaza adjacent to the main palace of the site. Even though the altar of Stela 38 had been clearly dedicated by *Aj Yax Chow Pat*, who was ruling in 801 AD, the monument makes no reference to him but to *K'inich B'ahlam*, who is shown in the "heart of the turtle". Freidel, Schele and Parker (1999), suggest that this is a reference to the carapace of the turtle, wherefrom the maize god emerges in the Mayan myth of resurrection. Should this be the case, then this altar links the most famous royal name of the *Waka* dynasty with the concept of resurrection.

Again, rejuvenating the prestige of the royal house seems to have been a major goal for the last members of the *Waka'* dynasty, wherefrom rebuilding the plaza area in front of the main palace may have been an important means to achieve that purpose. The excavations conducted by Juan Carlos Meléndez at the Ballgame adjacent to the plaza as well as at Structures L-13-30 and L-13-32, have corroborated that this complex was built during the Late Classic period, and that its use continued throughout the Terminal Classic period, at least as of surface ceramics that date to that age.

Equally important to the Ballgame is Structure L11-33. The pottery in this building suggests that it was built during the transition between the Late Classic and the Terminal Classic periods, or very early in the Terminal Classic period. The excavations conducted in L11-33, under the supervision of Jennifer Piehl and Stanley Guenter, have revealed an ample and much deteriorated stairway, which in the past incorporated a series of steps carved in bas-reliefs (see Lee, Piehl and Meléndez, this volume). Some of these blocks include hieroglyphs, while others show images or portions of them. Unfortunately, several blocks were stolen from the site after Ian Graham recorded them in the 1970's. However, the complete *corpus* suggests they were reused pieces of an earlier hieroglyphic stairway, likely incorporated in Structure L11-33 because of the prestige associated with the royal name of *K'inich B'ahlam*, present in some of them. This seems to be consistent with the presence of the name of *K'inich B'ahlam* in the nearby altar of Stela 38. In antiquity, almost all these blocks were scattered in the plaza adjacent to the building, and the stairway was partly destroyed. Then, the building suffered additional damage by modern looters. However, one carved block found *in situ* shows that the reused sculpted blocks were mingled with plain blocks, so that clearly they were used for decoration, and were not meant to form a coherent hieroglyphic text or an iconographic, mosaic-type composition.

The *Waka'* dynasty was evidently ruling this capital long after 801 AD, in a way that by the end, the rulers narrated the local history making reference to their most powerful ancestors and the existing political bonds with the supreme sovereigns of the Maya world. It is within this context that we need to go back to the perplexing archaeological record about the end of that story. Almost for sure, some monuments such as Stelae 24, 32, 33, 34, 38, and 39, were systematically destroyed by modern looters. At least, some of the stelae, like 32, 33, and 34, were relatively intact at the time they were found by looters during the 1960's, although they had fallen down and were broken in large pieces.

This year, Olivia Farr supervised the excavation of Stela 6 (see Farr and Martínez, this volume) also dating to the Late Classic period, and although the monument has suffered severe erosion, it fell to the ground frontally and inclined to the left, in large pieces. However, many other stelae were broken and scattered in antiquity. As an evidence of this, and right under Stela 6, Farr discovered large fragments of other monuments. It was clear that someone had placed those fragments there, and no evidence was found suggesting that they had been previously buried inside the plaza floor. Although circumstantially, this would indicate that those fragments were intentionally placed there, and that Stela 6 was thrown on top of them at a subsequent time.

Stela 6 depicts a person who wears a *huipil* and holds a serpent as a ceremonial bar. A much eroded female name appears in the hieroglyphic text at one side of the stela, reinforcing the identification of this individual as a woman. The only documented queen

with monuments of her own was the Lady *K'ab'il*, princess of Calakmul and wife of the king *K'inich B'ahlam* in the VII century. The style of Stela 6 is typical of that age. The woman in Stela 6 is looking north, in the direction of Stela 7, which may have probably been erected on the central line of the large stairway of the Southeast Acropolis. Therefore, it is possible that Stelae 6 and 7 formed a third pair of monuments dedicated by this royal couple. During the 2005 season we shall try to examine this hypothesis through the excavation of Stela 7, which has fallen down and is now partially buried. If some text comes forth referring to a lord, then it would be definite that Stela 7 was the portrait of a king. Anyway, we shall try to find evidence of other fragments of broken monuments under Stela 7, to define whether the deposit of Stela 6 was part of a larger event of ritual destruction.

Not far, Farr documented that Stela 10, a heavily eroded Early Classic monument, had been relocated next to the wall of the Southeast Acropolis, and that later, a coarse platform with blocks and dirt was built all around (see Farr and Martínez, this volume). It is not easy to define with some accuracy when was it that this platform was built, but that might have happened in the IX century following the fall of the dynasty, as in the VIII century the Southeast Acropolis was still a major public building with a fine masonry lining. Stela 10 depicts an individual that wears a mosaic-type helmet and a square shield, features that are typical of the Teotihuacan privileges. As it includes no texts, it can only be said that the placement of this monument seems to have been a coarse expression of an identical effort to refer to the days of glory, as observed in the previous and repeated references to *K'inich B'ahlam*. This hypothesis is reinforced by the discovery made by Guenter and Rich (2004: 107-108) that the base of the fragmented Stela 15 had been relocated during the Terminal Classic with a platform that surrounded it. Like we said, this monument narrates the history of *K'inich B'ahlam* and *Siyaj K'ahk'*.

Nearby Stela 10, Farr documented a very different situation (see Farr and Martínez, this volume). The basal fragments of Stela 9, another Early Classic monument whose carvings are in a fine state of preservation, rest fallen on the floor next to a massif ritual termination deposit. The upper levels of this deposit were disturbed by looters, who cleared the area around Stela 9 to check whether cutting it was worth the trouble. Fortunately, the lower levels of the deposit were protected by the trunk and roots of a very large tree, and they could be systematically excavated. The behavior of the termination ritual needs in-depth analysis, but clearly, the placement of the cut fragments was part of a specific activity. Given the violent destruction of the many vessels and the smashing of human bones involved in the event, it has been hypothesized that Stela 9 was broken and scattered all around as part of a termination ritual. Our investigations show no traits of people coming back to restore or reuse the Southeast Acropolis after the termination event.

To summarize the evidence recovered to this day, some stelae in *Waka'* were thrown down and broken into pieces, shortly after the vanishing of the royal court in the IX century. The effort involved in breaking and scattering the stelae, several of which exceeded 4 m in height, is amazing. Subsequently, some of the stelae were relocated and worshipped by people who built humble altar-platforms around them. Then a second wave of violence swept the place, this time focused on some major public buildings particularly from the Southeast Acropolis, and several other stelae were broken and scattered. Presently, we are only beginning to catch a glimpse of the situation in this series of events.

A small ritual termination deposit discovered by Piehl and Guenter next to the building with the blocks of the hieroglyphic stairway (see Lee, Piehl and Meléndez, this volume), suggests that this monument dedicated to *K'inich B'ahlam* in the Terminal Classic period was destroyed in one of these events. Since the 2003 season, Héctor Escobedo and Mary Jane Acuña have successively supervised the excavations at Structure N12-35, a temple seemingly dedicated to commemorate the most important events in the life of *K'inich B'ahlam II* and his wife, the Lady *K'abil* of Calakmul (Escobedo and Acuña 2004). In the 2004 season, Acuña found evidence of minor termination deposits on the axis of the deteriorated main stairway of N12-35. Those deposits were located on the north side of the building, close to the well-known Stelae 33 and 34 which looters evidently found broken but intact.

Elsewhere in the site core, like for instance in the residential group of Plaza 3 excavated by Ana Lucía Arroyave, Horacio Martínez and Varinia Matute since 2003, dwellers continued to live during the Terminal Classic period in wide residential units, such as Structures L13-17 and L13-19 (Arroyave and Martínez 2004). When the inhabitants left those residential units to relocate in a different nearby group, they apparently scattered their garbage in the abandoned group. There is little evidence of further ritual termination activities in other public buildings. Moreover, the investigations by Rich at the Temple Acropolis and in Structure N14-12 show the rejuvenation and use of this temple during the Terminal Classic period, as well as little evidence of destruction caused by some termination ritual at the end of the Late Classic period (see Rich, this volume). Finally, in 2003, the investigations conducted by David Lee at Structure L11-38, known as "The Palace", revealed a modest Terminal Classic remodeling, but no evidence of violent destruction occurred at the end of the Classic period (see Lee, Piehl and Meléndez, this volume).

Thus, the transition between the age of the royal court and any other system that may have replaced a government in *Waka'* during the Terminal Classic period, still remains quite obscure. However, several interesting patterns and trends are beginning to emerge as research continues. The main focus on the historic heroes of the dynasty, particularly on the kings called *K'inich B'ahlam*, continued up to the bitter end of the site history. In the epilogue, some violent and substantial efforts were made to destroy the key monuments of that history, followed by attempts to repair such execration by relocating the fragments of the stelae, and at the end, through a renewed violence against the main monuments and shrines. Who were responsible for such efforts? Although it has been occasionally argued that warriors from Tikal may have arrived in the site to destroy the monuments after 743 AD, this does not seem to be the case (Freidel and Escobedo 2003). Now it is believed that it is almost impossible that someone alien to the ancient kingdom of *Waka'* would have bothered to destroy the dynastic monuments, as even in other Classic capitals in western Petén attacked by foreign enemies at the end of their histories, the stelae do not seem to have suffered such a collective destruction. Perhaps we are now beginning to unveil the existence of internal struggles among local factions who witnessed the fall of the royal power. Some of them may have attempted to for ever obliterate the memory of the divine kings, while others sought to continue with their veneration, notwithstanding that throughout several generations, the devotion to royalty and to their sacred places had been left aside. In any case, the inhabitants of *Waka'* left behind a record of the Post-historical period, and although there are still many issues that

need to be clarified, it seems to be clear that the abandonment of their history was for them a process both painful and controversial.

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