

## A KING'S APOTHEOSIS: ICONOGRAPHY, TEXT, AND POLITICS FROM A CLASSIC MAYA TEMPLE AT HOLMUL

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*Excavations at the ancient Maya city of Holmul, Petén, have led to the discovery of a building decorated with an intricately carved and painted plaster frieze. The iconography of the frieze portrays seated lords, mountain spirits, feathered serpents, and gods of the underworld engaged in the apparent rebirth of rulers as sun gods. Large emblems carved on the side of the building identify the structure as a shrine for ancestor veneration. A dedicatory text carved along the bottom of the frieze contains a king list and references to the political and familial ties of the ruler who commissioned the temple. Together, the iconography and text of this structure provide evidence of function and meaning. They also shed new light on a century during Classic Maya history known as the Tikal "Hiatus," for which a limited number of texts are available. The information derived from this monument also broadens our understanding of the nature of hegemonic relationships among Classic Maya states.*

*El desarrollo de excavaciones en la antigua ciudad Maya de Holmul, Petén, llevó al descubrimiento de un edificio decorado con un friso elaboradamente esculpido y pintado. Su iconografía incluye representaciones de reyes, espíritus de la montaña, serpientes emplumadas y dioses del inframundo asistiendo al renacimiento de los gobernantes como dioses solares. Los emblemas modelados en las fachadas laterales del edificio permiten identificar su función como santuario para la veneración de los ancestros. Un texto dedicatorio inciso a lo largo del friso contiene una lista de reyes y referencias a los lazos políticos y familiares del comisionante del templo. Juntos, la iconografía y el texto asociados a esta estructura, nos proporcionan una serie de datos clave para entender su función y su significado. Asimismo, permiten aclarar una parte aún oscura de la historia de los reinos del sur de las tierras bajas mayas para la cual se dispone de muy pocos datos y que es usualmente conocida como el "Hiato de Tikal". La información derivada de este monumento también nos proporciona nuevos indicios sobre las relaciones de carácter hegemónico entre los estados mayas del periodo Clásico.*

In this paper, we discuss the highly decorated façade of a Classic-period Maya temple uncovered at Holmul in 2013 by the Holmul Archaeological Project (Estrada-Belli 2013; Than 2013). Carved imagery and inscriptions elucidate the function and historical context of the structure. The hieroglyphic narrative also alludes to political processes at work in the southern Maya Lowlands during the transition from the Early to the Late Classic period.

Holmul is a Maya city in northeastern Petén, Guatemala. It is situated on a ridge overlooking the mid course of the Holmul River, which flows east from the periphery of Tikal to Naranjo before

turning north towards Holmul and the Bay of Chetumal. The residential periphery of the city stretched for several kilometers, blending with the neighboring centers of Hamontun and K'ò (Figure 1).

Holmul was first investigated between 1909 and 1911 by Raymond E. Merwin of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University (Merwin and Vaillant 1932). Merwin excavated several richly furnished Early and Late Classic tombs, but after three field seasons he had not discovered any inscribed monuments. As a result, archaeologists bypassed the site for almost a century. In 2000, the Holmul Archaeo-

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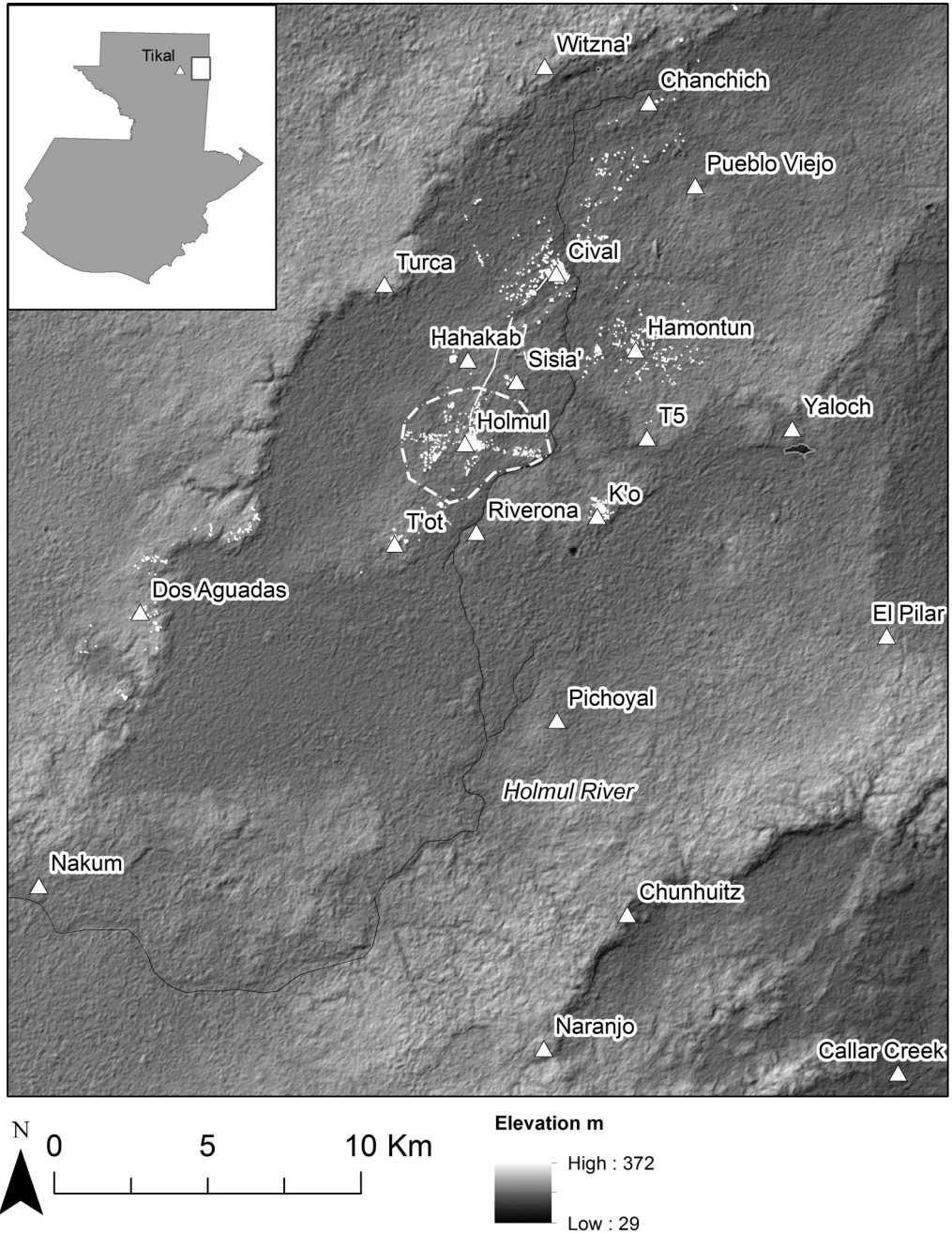


Figure 1. Map of Holmul Archaeological Project study region showing mapped settlement (white dots), neighboring centers and extent of residential zone around Holmul (dashed line; image by Estrada-Belli, topographic data courtesy of NASA [AIRSAR Star3i 1999 mission]).

logical Project began to document Preclassic- and Classic-period architecture and ceramic material in the area. Subsequent excavations and survey at and around Holmul (Callaghan and Neivens de Estrada 2016; Estrada-Belli 2001a, 2006, 2011;

Estrada-Belli et al. 2009; Grube 2003; Neivens de Estrada 2014; Tomasic and Estrada-Belli 2003) revealed a long history of occupation in this region from 1000 B.C. to about A.D. 1040.

The Preclassic era from 1000 B.C. to A.D.

200 was the time of greatest growth and expansion in settlement and monumental construction in the northeastern Petén, especially at Cival, the regional capital between 300 B.C. and A.D. 200. Holmul was the most important secondary center of Cival. Following the sacking of Cival around A.D. 200, a royal complex—with plazas, a ball court, and funerary temples—was built at La Sufricaya near the urban center of Holmul (Figure 1, Estrada-Belli 2011; Estrada-Belli et al. 2009). With the exception of Cival, all sites remained occupied throughout the Classic period until their final abandonment around A.D. 1040 (Estrada-Belli 2001a; Wahl et al. 2013).

The political history of the Holmul region during the Classic period has been largely unknown. The inscriptions and imagery at La Sufricaya reveal a local dynasty of *chak tok wayaab* rulers as early as A.D. 379. The fortunes of the dynasty were linked to the new political order established after the Teotihuacan *entrada* of A.D. 378 (Estrada-Belli et al. 2009; Fash et al. 2009; Grube 2003; Stuart 2005; Tokovinine 2013). The burial of a member of the Holmul dynasty in Room 1 of Building B, Group II at Holmul around A.D. 400 indicates that Group II retained its importance during this period (Estrada-Belli et al. 2009; Merwin and Vaillant 1932:Figure 12, Plate 36e). By the end of the sixth century, public buildings at La Sufricaya had been ritually terminated (Tokovinine and Estrada-Belli 2015:200). The carved monuments were broken and scattered around the site. Excavated thrones and artifacts in Groups I and III at Holmul make these two locations the likely seats of the royal court in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. Nonetheless, until now, no references to those rulers have been found (Estrada-Belli 2001a; Merwin and Vaillant 1932; Mongelluzzo 2011).

The next known Late Classic episode in the history of Holmul is documented on two monuments and a rock carving at Tikal, celebrating the capture of a *chak tok wayaab* individual in A.D. 748 that concluded a campaign waged by Tikal against Naranjo (Beliaev 2004; Estrada-Belli et al. 2009; Martin and Grube 2008 [2000]). This episode can be linked to a direct attack on the site of Holmul; the walls and ramparts around the site epicenter date to the same period. A plate

belonging to the Naranjo ruler known as “Bat *Kawiiil*” found in a burial in Building F in Group I at Holmul (Figure 2) reveals that the political relationship between Holmul and Naranjo continued after the decline of Tikal at the end of the eighth century and in the early ninth century (Martin and Grube 2008 [2000]:81; Merwin and Vaillant 1932:13–14, Plate 2).

The discovery of a well-preserved frieze on Building A of Group II at Holmul fills the gap in the history of the site between the currently known Early and Late Classic episodes. Initially documented by Merwin (Merwin and Vaillant 1932), the Late Classic construction phase of Building A is a highly unusual structure. It encases an earlier temple decorated with the abovementioned frieze. The south-oriented façade of the latest construction phase features a single doorway on one side instead of the customary central entrance (Merwin and Vaillant 1932:Figure 8). The doorway was probably decorated as an open maw, a portal to the underworld. An L-shaped hallway leads to a vaulted tomb in the center of the structure (Figure 3a). The south façade also presents carved stone armatures for stucco reliefs. The eastern side is preserved enough to suggest that it may have been decorated with the face of the sun god (Merwin and Vaillant 1932:Plate 4). There is no visible surface evidence of an access stairway. This building phase appears to have remained uncompleted, perhaps in connection with the abovementioned raid by Tikal. The defeat and capture of the Holmul ruler also would explain why the tomb at the end of the L-shaped passage was never occupied and why no shrine was built above it. Although monumental construction at Holmul continued well into the tenth century A.D., the work on Building A was never resumed.

The newly discovered frieze decorates the roof of the second-to-last construction phase of Building A. It lies 2 m to the east and a mere 20 cm below the floor of the unfinished tomb of the final construction phase (Figure 3b). The interior of this building was filled with the same rubble material that covered its exterior. Unlike the final construction phase, this building faces west. The decorated structure rests on a pyramidal platform about 6 m above the Early Classic floor of Group II, which, in turn, stood 4 m above the plaza.

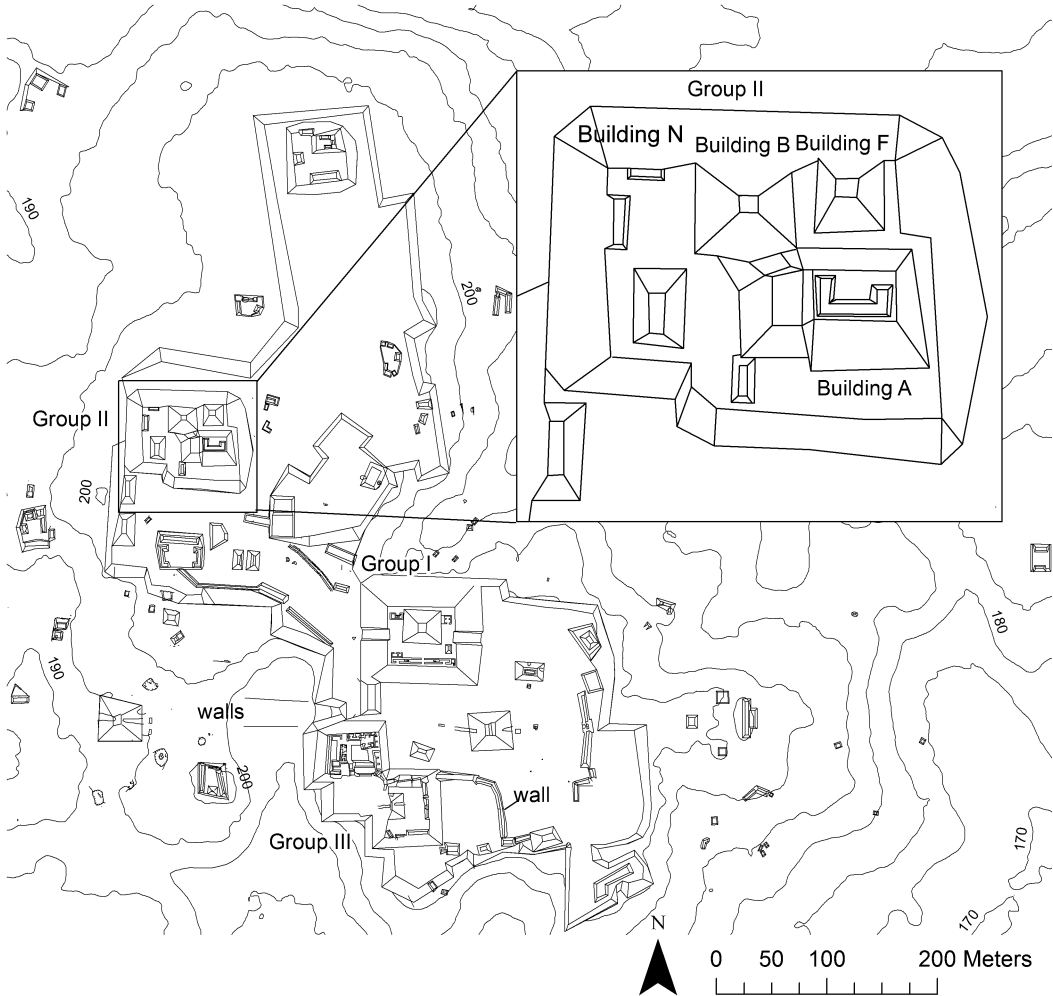


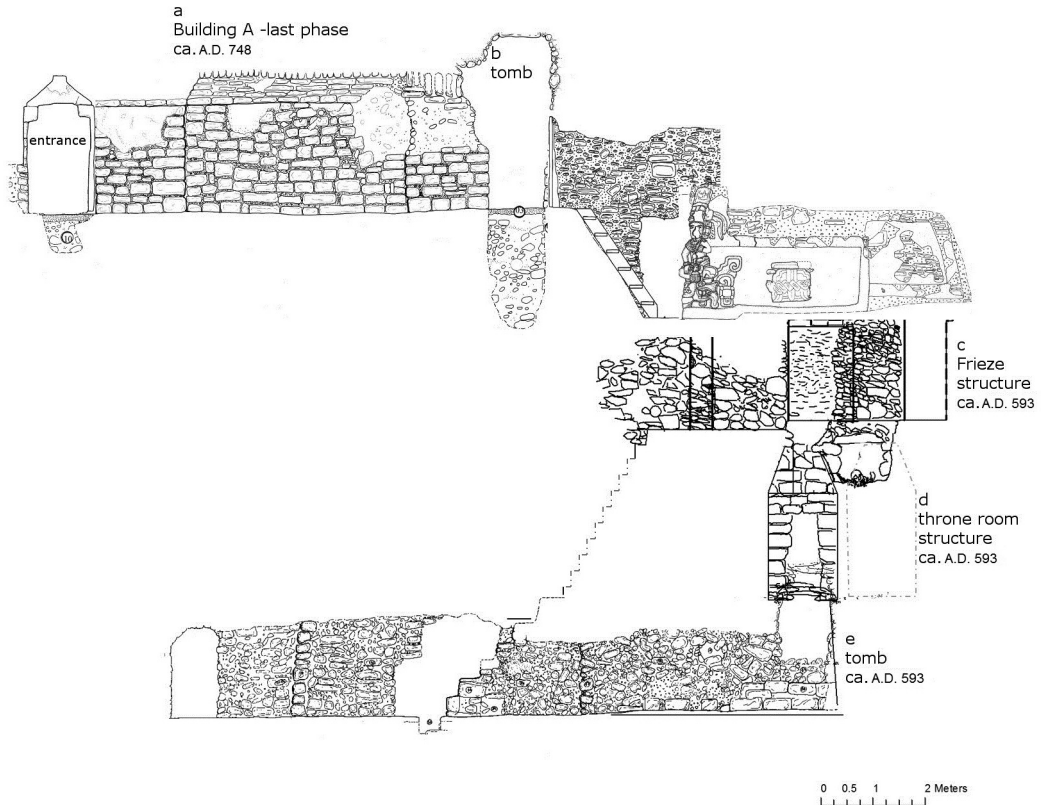
Figure 2. Map of ceremonial core of Holmul (by Francisco Estrada-Belli from Holmul Archaeological Project 2000–2015 survey data).

### The Iconography of the Holmul Frieze

The painted stucco relief decorates the western side of the roof of the building (Figure 4a; Tokovinine 2015). The main iconographic program does not extend beyond the corners, but the nearby southern and northern sides feature two identical emblems. Except for the more damaged north-western and northern sections, most of the frieze is well preserved, retaining several coats of paint. Yellow, orange, blue, and green paints highlight various details of the imagery and text. A hieroglyphic inscription runs along the entire length of the cornice of the western side of the roof. Its

northernmost section has been damaged, but the southern section remains relatively intact.

The corners and the central sections of the frieze have a near full-round sculpture quality and the rest of the frieze is executed in relief of various depths. Traces of incised sketch lines revealed by fallen stucco fragments (Figure 4b) imply some overall planning, but the style of the finished sculpture is not uniform. The northern half of the western wall and the glyph on the northern wall are executed in shallower relief compared to the images on the southern half of the western wall and the glyph on the southern wall. The northern section also shows greater



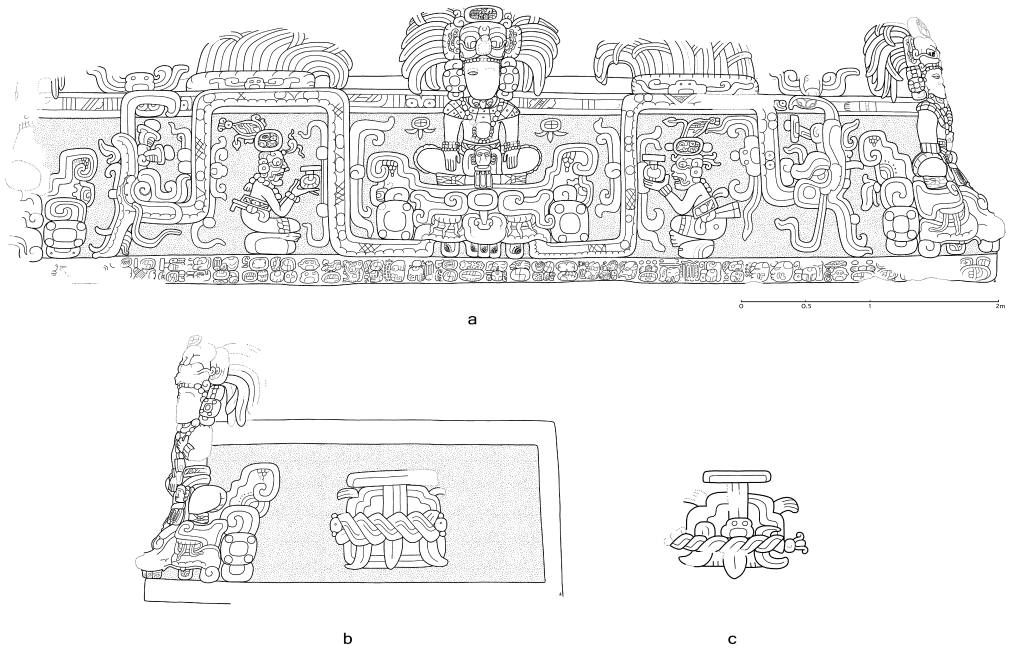
**Figure 3.** Composite image of profile drawings from excavations HOL.L.21 (bottom), HOL.L.20 (top) and HOL.T.78 (middle). Image by Francisco Estrada-Belli, drawings by Mauricio Diaz (top and bottom), Francisco Estrada-Belli (middle), and Angel Castillo (frieze).

mastery of human anatomy and a preference for incised lines. The southern half is somewhat cruder in the execution of anatomical details and other features. It is also distinguished by appliqué decorations and painted elements. The main inscription does not exhibit such stylistic variation and was probably produced by the more competent artist responsible for the northern section.

Epigraphic evidence (see below) dates the dedication of the building to around A.D. 593 and points to a political connection between the rulers of Holmul and the Naranjo dynasty during the reign of Naranjo ruler *Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich* (“Aj Wosal”). The overall style of the texts and images of the frieze closely resemble those of *Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich*’s monuments and pottery (Graham 1978:69–70, 73, 97, 103; Martin et al. 2015) and the monumental friezes of his palace compound in the Central Acropolis at Naranjo (Fialko 2008:53–62; Fialko and Schuster 2012:25).

The center and corners of the Holmul frieze feature three representations of animate mountains. Two feathered serpents emerge from the mouth of the central mountain towards the southern and the northern corners of the scene (Figure 4a). Such serpents usually represent breath, the moist air coming from caves, and they sometimes carry or exhale gods and ancestral spirits (Saturno et al. 2005:7–25; Taube 2004:79–86). The coiled bodies of the serpents stretch across the entire surface of the frieze, so that the other two mountains appear to emerge from their wide-open mouths. These mountains have neither breath serpents nor name cartouches. Two seated elderly deities with “cruller eyes” are depicted in the coils of each serpent. They face the central mountain and hold **NAAH-WAAJ** (“first *tamales*”) glyphs in an offering gesture.

The top of each mountain is occupied by the near life-size figure of a seated lord. The sculpture on the northern corner is heavily eroded, but the



**Figure 4. Building A frieze (drawings by A. Tokovinine; max. height 2.40m): (a) western side; (b) southern side; (c) detail of the northern side.**

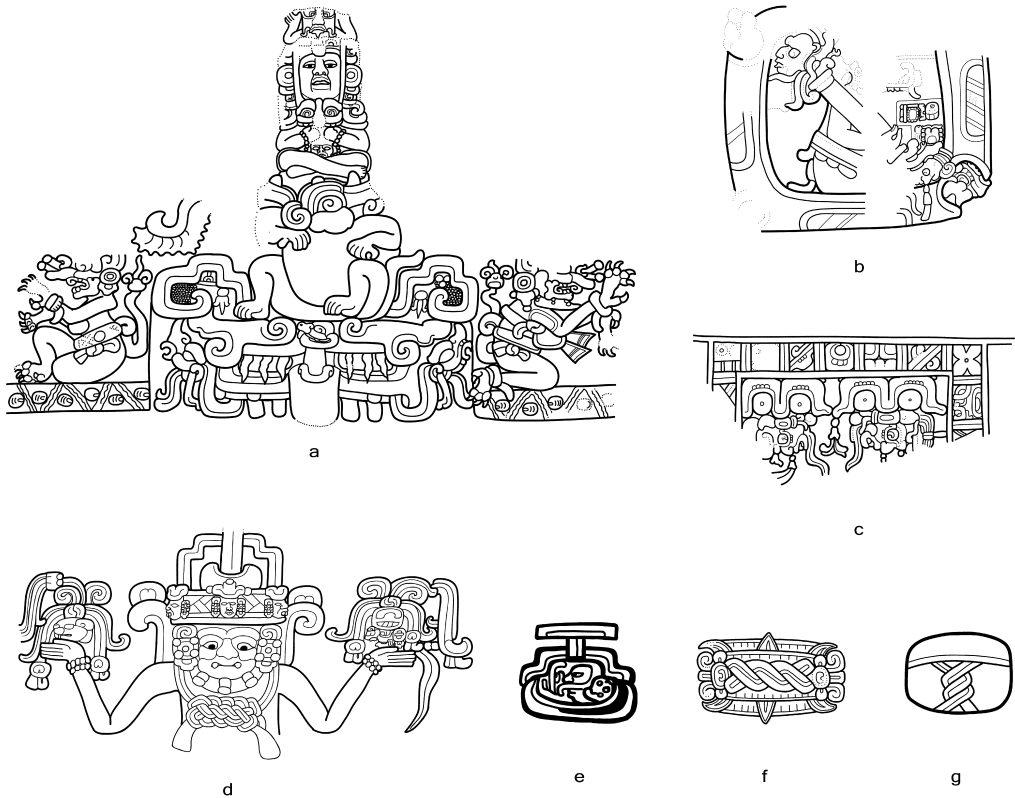
central and the southern individuals are relatively well preserved. Their faces appear to have sustained damage during a deactivation ritual. The postures of the figures are nearly identical. The hands of the central individual are placed on his knees (Figure 4a), whereas the left arm of the southern corner individual is flexed and the hand is grasping the chain of his chest pectoral (Figure 4b). Both figures wear pelts, rigid belts with masks and jade plaques, bracelets, necklaces, and chest pectorals. They have Principal Bird Deity headdresses and avian chin masks. The costume details are consistent with the representations of the Classic Maya Sun God (Hellmuth 1987:285–293, Figures 635–654), but the bodily attributes of the deity are absent. Instead, the Holmul figures have the idealized Maize God faces of Classic Maya royalty and nobles. A sky band with stars and “shiners” extends the full length of the frieze at the level of the shoulders of the seated figures (Figure 4a). The band explicitly places the scene in a celestial setting, consistent with the Sun God costumes of the seated protagonists.

The iconographic program of the Holmul frieze conforms to a frequent theme in Classic

Maya Art that Taube (2004:74–86) and Salazar (2015) have identified as the apotheosis of royal ancestors as celestial bodies. It commonly depicts the sun for kings and the moon for queens as they ascend, or emerge from, the mythical Flower Mountain. A caption to a sun-like ancestor on Yaxchilán Stela 3 (Figure 5b) identifies this sacred site as “Five *Jan* (flower) Mountain.”

The composition of the Holmul frieze resembles the imagery of a sixth-century stucco frieze on the roof of Structure 1A at Balamkú (Boucher and Dzul 2001). This frieze shows four mountains topped with saurian monsters from whose gaping mouths seated Sun God-like lords emerge (Figure 5a). In the spaces between the mountains, jaguars with skeletal mandibles are shown sitting on water bands (Baudez 1996). The iconography of several later Yaxchilán monuments offers another potential clue. They include representations of anthropomorphic star deities with feline traits in the same celestial realm as deified royal ancestors (Figure 5c; see Chinchilla 2005:119–205).

Stars play a prominent role in the solar apotheosis theme, as well as in the scene on the Palenque sarcophagus. In the latter, the nobles



**Figure 5.** Iconographic and glyphic references of the Building A frieze (drawings by A. Tokovinine): (a) detail of the stucco frieze, Structure 1A, Balamkú (after Baudez 1996:38–39); (b) detail of Yaxchilan Stela 3; (c) detail of Yaxchilan Stela 4; (d) detail of the stucco frieze from Placeres (after Mayer 1988:Figure 6); (e) detail of the inscription in Tomb 23, Rio Azul (after Adams 1999:Plate 6); (f) detail of Stela 40, Tikal; (g) TZ'AK logogram, detail of Cancuen Hieroglyphic Stairway (after Mayer 1987:Pl. 120).

assume the role of the stars that accompany the deceased ruler portrayed as the sun (Chinchilla 2006). The Balamkú symbolism implies some kind of confrontation between the feline star deities and the sun. On the contrary, the Holmul frieze highlights the gift of the “first *tamales*.” The inscription on the altar to Stela 13 at Copán also mentions “making food” (*patlaj uwe'*) for the sun deity in the east (Houston et al. 2006:123), perhaps not unlike the “great *tamales*” (*noh wah*) offered to the gods and spirits in Yucatek- and Lacandon-speaking communities (Taube 1989:40). The use of *naah* (“first”) rather than *yax* (“original”) means that these are not the primordial *tamales*, but rather the *tamales* offered by the star gods to the deified ancestor as he ascended to the sky for the first time.

The captions in the headdresses of the deities on the Holmul frieze (Figures 6b and 6d; Table 1) identify the deity to the left of the central figure as *Paat Kab Baak* (“Back Land Bone”). The last character is damaged, so an alternative reading **WINIK** (“person”) cannot be discarded. The name may be a reference to commoners, as in Yucatek *aj pach kab winik* “backcountry people” (Barrera et al. 1995:617), or to the bones of commoners. The name of the deity to the right begins with a character that resembles a syllabic **be**. The rest of the name consists of the logograms **TZ'AK** and **AJAW**, which probably carry the same connotations here as in the more common *bolon tz'ak[buul] ajaw* (many generations lord[s]) name that refers to royal ancestors. Therefore, it is tempting to interpret the two deities as repre-

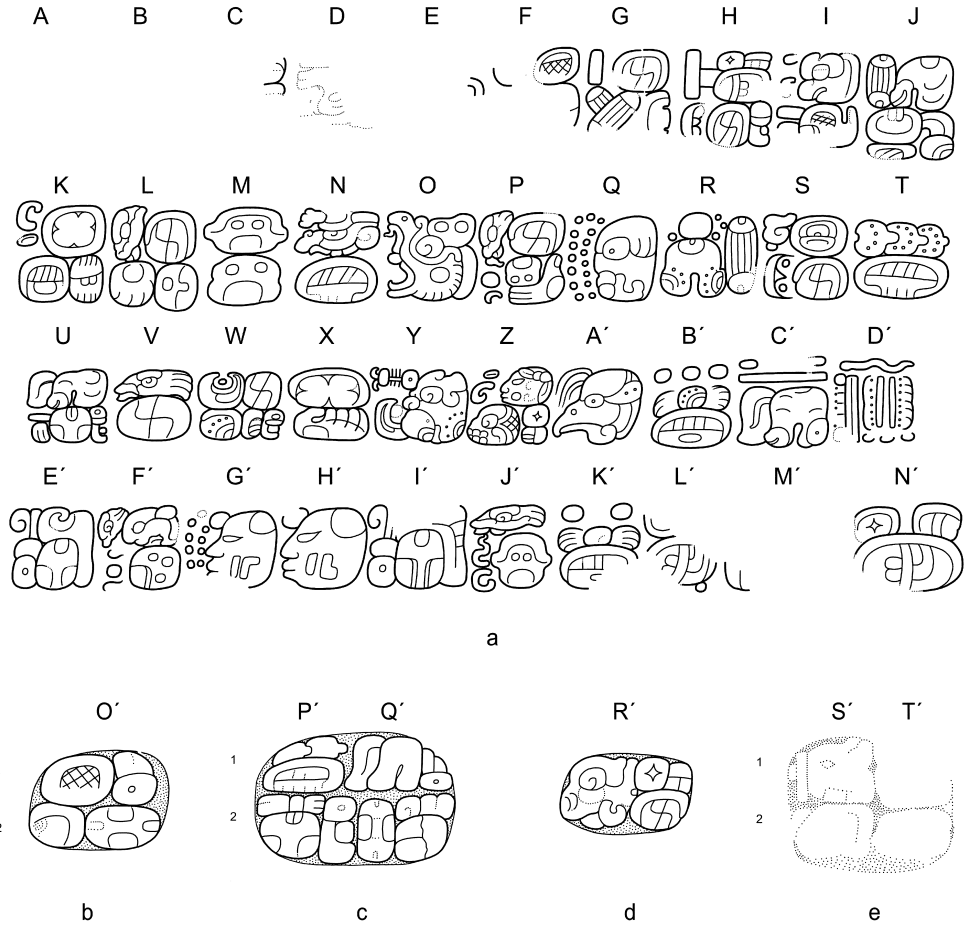


Figure 6. Close-up view of the inscriptions on the Building A frieze (drawings by A. Tokovinine): (a) main text; (b) Caption 1; (c) Caption 2; (d) Caption 3; (e) Caption 4.

sentations of the humble and noble ancestral spirits who join and sustain the new sun.

The caption in the headdress of the lord seated on the central mountain (Figure 6c; Table 1) identifies him as *Tzahb Chan Yopaat Mahcha* (“*Yopaat* of bark string/strip is a rattle in the sky”). The first character in the name becomes interchangeable with the **OCH** logogram in some Late Classic and Postclassic inscriptions. Nonetheless, the *u-* ergative prefix in the text on a travertine bowl in the Dumbarton Oaks collection (Tokovinine 2012:124–125) implies that the sign in question was not vowel-initial. Kelley’s (1976:154–155) reading of the grapheme as **TZAHB** “rattle (snake)” was recently strength-

ened by a possible **tza-ba** substitution on Edzná monuments (Pallán 2009:155–166). The last word of the name is probably derived from *mahch*, which means “string, strip of bark” in Ch’orti’ (Wisdom 1950:521). The final *-a*’ is likely an agentive suffix (Houston et al. 2001:6–7). “Bark-string person” could refer to the knotted pectorals and belt ornaments of rain deities (Houston and Taube 2012:44; Stone and Zender 2011:5–6). The caption concludes with the *chak tok wayaab* (“cloud-red dreaming place”) title of the Holmul dynasty (Estrada-Belli et al. 2009). Therefore, the caption identifies the deified sun-like ancestor figure as a local ruler named *Tzahb Chan Yopaat Mahcha*’.



Table 1. Hieroglyphic Inscriptions.

Block	Transcription	Transliteration	Translation
<i>Main Text</i>			
(A)	missing	...	...
(B)	missing	...	...
(C)	?-?	...	...
(D)	?-?	...	...
(E)	missing	...	...
(F)	?-pa-?-?	...	...
(G)	<b>5 TZ'AK</b> <b>?WIIN-na</b>	<i>jo' tz'ak</i> <i>wiin</i>	fifth/five to succeed <i>Wiin</i>
(H)	<b>NAAH TE' AJAW</b> <b>u-TZ'AK-a</b>	<i>te' naah ajaw</i> <i>utz'a[h]ka'</i>	<i>Te' Naah</i> lord; [it was] his time
(I)	<b>wa-WA'OOK ma-k'a</b>	<i>wa' ook mak'</i>	<i>Wa' Ook Mak'</i>
(J)	<b>ko AAT tzi-li-pi</b>	<i>ko[k] aat tzilip</i>	<i>Kok Aat Tzilip</i>
(K)	<b>ya-K'IN i-su</b>	<i>yak'in i'is</i>	<i>Yak'in I'is</i> ;
(L)	<b>u-TZ'AK</b> <b>ba ?HUT</b>	<i>utz'a[h]k[a']</i> <i>ba[ah] hut</i>	[it was] his time ...
(M)	<b>MIJIIN-?SAAK</b>	<i>mijiin saak</i>	...
(N)	<b>WITZ' CHAN</b>	<i>witz' chan</i>	<i>Witz' Chan</i>
(O)	<b>?o</b>	<i>o'</i>	<i>O'</i>
(P)	<b>u-TZ'AK</b> <b>1 CH'AM</b>	<i>utz'a[h]k[a']</i> <i>juun ch'am[ab]</i>	[it was] his time <i>Juun Ch'amab</i>
(Q)	<b>K'UH</b>	<i>k'uh</i>	<i>K'uh</i>
(R)	T174.530 <b>ko</b>	...	"altar"
(S)	<b>?-lo</b> <b>u-TZ'AK</b>	... <i>utz'a[h]k[a']</i>	... [it was] his time
(T)	<b>TZAHB CHAN</b>	<i>tzahb chan</i>	<i>Tzahb Chan</i>
(U)	<b>YOP AAT ma-cha-a</b>	<i>yopaat ma[h]cha'</i>	<i>Yopaat Ma[h]cha'</i> ;
(V)	<b>u-TZ'AK</b>	<i>utz'a[h]k[a']</i>	[it was] his time
(W)	<b>20-TZ'AK-TUUN-?li-a/</b> <b>20-TUUN-TZ'AK-?ka-a</b>	<i>winik tz'a[h]ktuunila'</i> <i>winik tuun tz'a[h]ka'</i>	person who bundled a score of years
(X)	<b>K'IN-chi</b>	<i>k'inich</i>	<i>K'inich</i>
(Y)	<b>ta-ja TUUN/CHAHK</b>	<i>taja[l] tuun/chahk</i>	<i>Tajal Tuun/Chahk</i> ,
(Z)	<b>ya-AJAW KAAAN AJAW</b>	<i>yajaw kaan[ul] ajaw</i>	the vassal of <i>Kaanul</i> lord,
(A')	<b>MAM</b>	<i>[u]mam</i>	the grandson of
(B')	<b>3 WINIK.HAAB</b>	<i>hux winikhaab</i>	three score-year [person]
(C')	<b>7 YOP AAT</b>	<i>huk yop aat</i>	seven <i>Yopaat</i> [person]
(D')	<b>AJ-?NUM-sa-?ji</b>	<i>ajnumsaaj [chan k'inich]</i>	"Aj Wosal"
(E')	<b>SAK CHUWEN</b>	<i>sak chuwen</i>	white <i>chuwen</i> ,
(F')	<b>u-BAAH 1 TAHN</b>	<i>ubaah [u]juun tahn</i>	the cherished one of
(G')	<b>K'UH IXIK</b>	<i>k'uh[ul] ixik</i>	holy lady
(H')	<b>IXIK</b>	<i>ix-</i>	lady
(I')	<b>SAK CHUWEN</b>	<i>sak chuwen</i>	white <i>chuwen</i>
(J')	<b>u-MIJIIN</b>	<i>umijiin</i>	the offspring of
(K')	<b>2 WINIK.HAAB</b>	<i>cha' winikhaab</i>	two score-year
(L')	<b>AJAW</b>	<i>ajaw</i>	lord
(M')	missing	...	...
(N')	<b>AJAW</b>	<i>ajaw</i>	lord
<i>Caption 1</i>			
(O'1)	<b>pa-ti</b>	<i>paat</i>	<i>Paat</i>
(O'2)	<b>?KAB BAAK</b>	<i>kab baak</i>	<i>Kab Baak</i>
<i>Caption 2</i>			
(P'1)	<b>TZAHB CHAN</b>	<i>tzahb chan</i>	<i>Tzahb Chan</i>
(Q'1)	<b>YOP AAT-ti</b>	<i>yop aat</i>	<i>Yopaat</i>
(P'2)	<b>ma-cha-a</b>	<i>ma[h]cha'</i>	<i>Mahcha'</i>

Table 1 (continued). Hieroglyphic Inscriptions.

Block	Transcription	Transliteration	Translation
(Q'2)	<b>CHAK</b> ?to <b>WAY</b>	<i>chak to[k] way[aab]</i>	<i>Chak Tok Wayaab</i>
Caption 3			
(R')	?be <b>TZ'AK AJAW</b>	<i>... tz'ak ajaw</i>	<i>... Tz'ak Ajaw</i>
Caption 4			
(S'1)	<b>6</b> ? <b>CHAN</b>	<i>wak chan</i>	<i>Wak Chan</i>
(T'1)	?-?	...	...
(S'2)	?	...	...
(T'2)	?	...	...

The caption accompanying the figure on the northern corner is missing, and the caption for the southern figure is heavily eroded (Figure 6e; Table 1). The name phrase of the latter seems to begin with *Wak Chan* (“Six Sky”). Judging from the contours of the glyph blocks, it does not include the *chak tok wayaab* title and does not appear in the list of ancestors in the main inscription on the frieze. Consequently, the figure might represent a deity. Two known Classic Maya theonyms begin with the number six. One of the regional Maize Gods is called *Wak Chan Nal (winik)*, “Six Sky (corn) Place (person)” (Tokovinine 2013:115–120). The court of God D is usually placed at *Wak Chan (Witz)*, “Six Sky (Mountain),” and he may be occasionally referred to as a “Six Sky (Mountain) lord” (Boot 2008).

The glyphic emblems on the northern and southern sides of the roof (Figures 4b, 4c) combine several elements that spell the name of the building. These include T48 **NAAH**, T533, half of T510cd quatrefoil, and a twisted cord. T48:533 may be a single grapheme (Hellmuth 1987:85–101, Figures 143–153; Stuart 2005:121–122, Figure 90). T510cd quatrefoil represents a cave (Fash 2005:119–122) and is possibly read as **PAN** “cavity/hollow” (Carter and Houston 2010). The same T48 (:533):T510cd compound is present on the Early Classic building at Placeres (Figure 5d; see Mayer 1988:54–59, Figure 6) and in Tomb 23 at Río Azul (Figure 5e; see Houston 1998:351–352). The whole T48:T533:T510cd combination could be a full Early Classic form of the **NAAH** “house” logogram. The variable graphemes in these three cases are the **UW** “moon” logogram at Río Azul, a full-figure **MAM** “grandfather” with

**AJAW** “lord” at Placeres, and the twisted cord at Holmul. The twisted cord is a common motif in Classic Maya iconography (Figure 5f) and the main element of the **TZ'AK** logogram (Figure 5g). Consequently, the name of the Holmul building could be *tz'a(h)k/tz'akab naah*, “the house of time/sacredbundles/succession/generations.”

### The Hieroglyphic Text

The main inscription on the western side of the roof of Building A consists of 40 hieroglyphic blocks (Figure 6a). The first six blocks are heavily damaged. It is likely that the damaged section contained a Calendar Round date and at least one predicate. The remaining text is relatively well preserved and legible (Table 1).

The narrative in Blocks H–N' is composed of a series of repetitive clauses with non-verbal predicates. Similar narrative structures are found on contemporaneous Naranjo monuments such as Stela 38 (Graham 1978:79). Each clause begins with the expression *utz'ahka'* and its translation merits a discussion.

Two *tz'ak* roots and their derivations are attested in Classic Maya inscriptions and both are spelled with the same **TZ'AK** logogram. Kaufman and Norman (1984:134) reconstruct *\*tz'äk* “complete” as a positional and a transitive verb stem for Proto-Ch'olan. The positional verb — “to take place in a certain order” — is combined with the *-bu* suffix and becomes a transitive verb *tz'akbu* “to succeed/complete.” This verb and its participle (*tz'akbuul*) occur in Classic Maya references to dynastic succession (Houston 1998; Martin 2003:38; Stuart 2003:356–357, 2011:3–4; Stuart et al. 1999:32). In Acalan Chontal, -

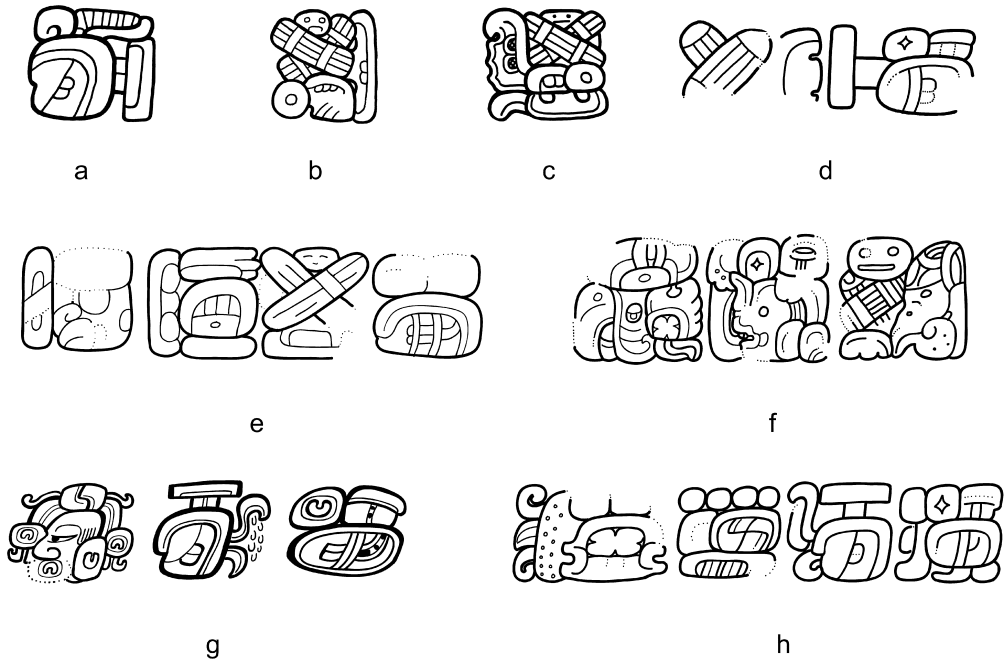


Figure 7. *Wiin Te' Naah* and its lords (drawings by A. Tokovinine): (a) detail of Tikal Stela 31:E15 (after 3D scan by A. Tokovinine); (b) detail of Copan Altar Q:B2 (after 3D scan by A. Tokovinine); (c) detail of Yaxchilan Lintel 25:G2 (after Graham and Von Euw 1977:56); (d) detail of Holmul Building A frieze; (e) detail of a wooden box (K2-M1), Museo Alvaro Obregon (after photograph by C. Pallan); (f) detail of Copan Stela 12:E11-12 (after Stuart 2004:fig. 11.13); (g) detail of an Early Classic vessel (K1446); (h) detail of Tres Islas Stela 2:K7-L3 (after photograph by I. Graham).

*tz'ak* functions as a numerical classifier in the count of rulers (Smailus 1975:27–34).

The second root—a transitive verb *tz'ak*—means “to add, to bring together” in Ch’orti’ (Hull 2005:109). Its nominalized form—*tz'ahk*—signifies “bundle, joint” (Wisdom 1950:734). The adjective *tz'akar* may be translated as “bundled, joined” (Wisdom 1950:737). Yucatek *tz'akal* as “knotted” (Barrera et al. 1995:873) is reminiscent of the basic **TZ'AK** character that represents twisted cords (Figure 5g). Acalan Chontal uses the cognate *tz'akal* in the context of tribute bundles (Smailus 1975:87). In Classic Maya inscriptions, this verb appears in the expression “he bundles spears/sticks” (*utz'akaw te'*), referring to captives (Stuart and Graham 2003:61–63), tribute-givers (Graham 1978:86; Stuart 2006:133–134), and *haab* months (Houston and Mathews 1985:11, Figure 7a). The possessed nominalized form of this root (*utz'ahka'/utz'ahkaj*) links sequential events with or without distance numbers (e.g., Blocks F15, H6, and H9 on Tikal Stela 31;

see Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Figure 52). It is clear from these contexts that the expression refers to the elapsed time that is bundled together like Aztec *xiuhmolpilli* and year-bundles at Teotihuacan (Fash et al. 2009:206–209).

The Holmul narrative, therefore, refers to a succession of individuals who bundled the years in reference to their time in office or their lifetime. This interpretation is strengthened by the title of the last person in the sequence who is called *winik tz'ak-tuunil-a'* or *winik tuun tz'ahka'*—“person who bundled a score of years.” The expression may be compared to a passage on Dos Pilas Hieroglyphic Stairway 1:B2-B3: *huli ucha'tz'a[h]k uwiniikhaab ti ajawlel* “it came, the second bundling of his score of years in kingship” (Houston and Mathews 1985:11, Figure 7c).

The partially damaged clause in Blocks E–H ends with the title “five/fifth to succeed *Wiin Te' Naah* lord.” *Wiin Te' Naah* is the toponym otherwise known as *Wite' Naah* or *Wi' Te' Naah*. It is of paramount importance as a location at Teoti-

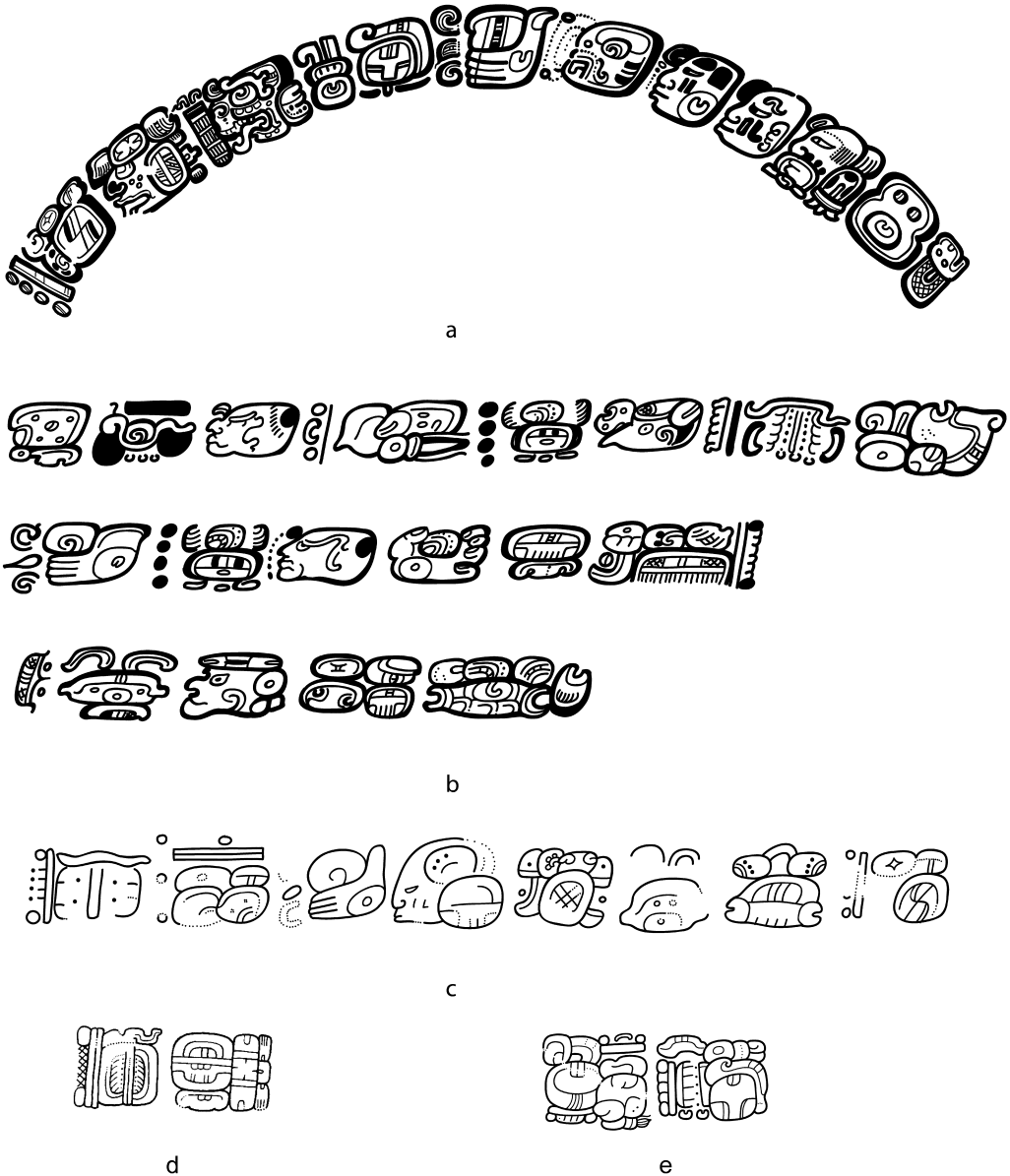


Figure 8. Names and parentage statements of sixth-century Naranjo rulers (drawings by A. Tokovinine): (a) *K'inich Tajal Chahk's* name phrase on the vessel in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (K5458); (b) *Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich's* name phrase on a painted bowl (K681); (c) *Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich's* name phrase on Naranjo Altar 1:I11-K5; (d) *Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich's* name phrase on Altar 2:B3-A4, Naranjo; (e) *Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich's* name phrase on Stela 47:A7-A8, Naranjo.

huacan associated with major political upheaval in the Southern Maya Lowlands during the Early Classic period (Fash et al. 2009; Martin 2003; Stuart 2000, 2004). It is spelled **wi-TE'-NAAH** in Early Classic texts (Figure 7a) and (**wi**)-T600-TE'-NAAH (Figures 7b, 7c) in later references.

It has been argued that the gloss was *wi' te'* or *wih te'* as in “root [of the] tree” and by extension “foundation” or “origin” (Stuart 2004:236–238). The new T600-na spelling on the Building A frieze (Figure 7d) refutes this interpretation by recording an otherwise under-spelled consonant

at the end of the word. The actual gloss in **wi-TE'** and T600-**TE'** is probably *wiin te'* with a long vowel clued by the disharmony principle (Houston et al. 1998).

The translation of *wiin te'* is uncertain. The Tzotzil verb *win* “to appear, be seen” (Laughlin 1975:370) or “to appear in the distance, be clearly exposed, be manifest/public” (Laughlin and Haviland 1988:328) is probably the same gloss as *win* in Yukatek *winba* for “image/statue” (Barrera et al. 1995:923). A corresponding **wi-ni-BAAH** spelling occurs in Palenque inscriptions (Schele and Mathews 1979:cat. no. 431), and there may be even a substitution of **wi-ni-BAAH** by T600-**BAAH** on Dos Pilas Stela 15 (Houston and Stuart 1998:82–83, Figure 9d). The iconography of T600 and its use in Classic Maya imagery suggest that it represents crossed bundles, perhaps used in New Fire rituals (Fash et al. 2009). A large bonfire on a pyramid or a scaffold would qualify as “wood that appears in the distance.” Given its Teotihuacan associations, however, a possibility of a foreign gloss cannot be discarded.

There are several “*Wiin Te' Naah* lords” in Classic Maya inscriptions. Some could be foreign rulers; others were Maya lords who travelled to and derived legitimacy from *Wiin Te' Naah*. The “*Wiin Te' Naah* lord” *Tajoom Uk'ab Tuun* in the narrative on a wooden box from the Piedras Negras region (Figure 7e) was likely a foreign overlord (Zender 2007). The founder of the Copán dynasty only travelled to *Wiin Te' Naah* (Stuart 2004), but was also called “*Wiin Te' Naah* lord” (Figure 7f). A “*Wiin Te' Naah* lord” from Río Azul (Figure 7g) and a “fourth successor of the *Wiin Te' Naah* lord” from the Cancuén royal dynasty (Figure 7h) were likely local lords with a connection to a foreign place.

The presence of this title in the sequence of Holmul rulers complements the evidence from the Early Classic palace complex at La Sufriçaya, which was occupied by members of the Holmul *chak tok wayaab* lineage. The palace was decorated with Teotihuacan-inspired martial themes including warriors, captives, and scaffold sacrifice, as well as with textual and visual references to travel and to the arrival of a foreign overlord at Tikal (Estrada-Belli et al. 2009; Tokovinine and Estrada-Belli 2015). The “fifth to succeed” expression introduces a sequence of five rulers,

so it could be a reference to them as those “five to succeed the *Wiin Te' Naah* lord.” This would mean that by the A.D. 590s, there were five successive Holmul rulers after the founder of the La Sufriçaya palace who held office around A.D. 379–422.

The name of the first of these five individuals in the Holmul list (Figure 6a; Table 1; Blocks I–K) features a theonym with a structure *wa' ook* (“foot stood up”), meaning place, deity name (Tokovinine 2013:39). *Mak'* “cork tree” (Barrera et al. 1995:486) in Block I would be a place and *Kok Aat* would be an otherwise unknown god. The second half of the name in Block K includes a rare **ya-K'IN** spelling (also found in the name of a scribe on the K7459 vessel from the region north of Holmul) and an even more unusual **i-su** or **i-ki**.

The beginning of the name of the second individual in Blocks L–M (Figure 6a; Table 1) resembles the name phrase of “Animal Skull” of Tikal (Grube and Martin 2000:51–53). The second half of the name in Blocks N–O follows the template “God X in the sky is Y” or “God X is Y in the sky.” The reading **o** for the deity name is preferable in light of the **WITZ'** “waterfall” significance of the initial word of the name phrase. *Aj K'ahk' O' Chahk* is a rain deity venerated at Yaxchilán (Stuart 2013). There seems to be a connection between the *O'* bird and rain, making “*O'* (bird) in the sky is a waterfall (torrential rain?)” a suitable interpretation of the name in the Holmul inscription.

The first half of the name of the third individual in Blocks P–Q (Figure 6a; Table 1) should probably be transliterated as *Juun Ch'am[ab] K'uh* (“one taking-god”). The missing *-ab* suffix may be reconstructed from grammatically similar names (Tokovinine and Zender 2012:55). The remaining part of the name in Blocks R–S contains a combination of two undeciphered characters (T174–T530) and an opaque sequence of syllables (**ko-?-lo**).

The name of the fourth individual in Blocks T–U—*Tzahb Chan Yopaat Mahcha'* (Figure 6a; Table 1)—is identical to the name in the headdress of the central character on the frieze (Figure 6c). The sculptors emphasized the connection by spacing the text so that Blocks T–U would be directly underneath the protagonist of the scene (Figure

4a). The appearance of Tzahb Chan Yopaat Mahcha' in the list confirms that he was a deified ancestor and that the building was dedicated to celebrate his spiritual transformation upon death.

The rest of the inscription (Blocks V–N') consists of the name and titles of the individual who likely commissioned the building (Figure 6a; Table 1). It begins with the “person who bundled a score of years” title discussed above. The personal name in Blocks X–Y may be read as *K'inich Tajal Tuun* or *K'inich Tajal Chahk*. The second option would imply that he was a namesake of an earlier Naranjo ruler (Figure 8a; see Martin and Grube 2008 [2000]:71). The logogram in the Holmul text, however, lacks several **CHAHK** features.

The text in Block Z informs that K'inich Tajal Tuun was a “vassal (*y-ajaw*) of *Kaanul* lord(s),” referring to the “Snake-Head” dynasty later based at Calakmul. The term *y-ajaw* usually indicates a state of subordination of one ruler by another (Houston 1993:139; Houston and Mathews 1985:Figure 12; Martin and Grube 1995). Possessed forms of *ajaw* with an opposite meaning of one's overlord usually feature an additional suffix *-aal* as in *w-ajwaal* “my lord” (Law et al. 2013). The name of the overlord is not specified, as if the patronage over K'inich Tajal Tuun extended to all or to consecutive members of the *Kaanul* dynasty. Holmul rulers did not have an emblem glyph (“lord of place X”), but the statement indicates their royal rank vis-à-vis other dynasties, not unlike the cases of other ruling families without emblem glyphs (Houston 1986).

The text continues with a parentage statement that mentions K'inich Tajal Tuun's grandfather, mother, and father in Blocks A'–N' (Figure 6a; Table 1). Similarly structured statements appear on Tikal Stelae 3, 7, 12, 17, a stairway block from La Corona, and all refer to maternal grandfathers (Beliaev et al. 2013:53, 61, 75–77, 85–88; Martin 2008a, 2008b:5, Figure 5; Tokovinine and Fialko 2007:11–12). Some of the Tikal examples also omit the ergative *u-* prefix before *mam* for “[his] grandson.”

According to Blocks A'–E' of the text, K'inich Tajal Tuun's grandfather was a ruler of Naranjo who can be identified by the name of Ajnumsaaj [Chan K'inich] (“Aj Wosal”) (Figures 8b–8e), the “white *chuwén*” title of Naranjo lords (Figures

8b and 8e), and the rare “Seven *Yopaat*” epithet (Figures 8 band 8e). The paleography of ?NUM (T206) in the frieze text (Block D') clarifies the reading of this royal name as “Sun God is making passage in the sky” (Martin et al. 2015).

K'inich Tajal Tuun's mother (Blocks F'–I') is provided with a royal epithet of “holy lady” and the dynastic title “white *chuwén*.” She must have been Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich's daughter. K'inich Tajal Tuun's father (Blocks J'–N') is mentioned as a “two *k'atun* lord” and by another title of which only the second word—*ajaw*—was preserved. No name is given, which happens when the person is already mentioned in the text. Judging from the honors bestowed upon Tzahb Chan Yopaat Mahcha', he could well have been K'inich Tajal Tuun's recently deceased father.

The “three-*k'atun*” title of Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich in Block B' permits the reconstruction of the approximate dedication date of the Holmul frieze. Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich acceded to kingship in A.D. 546 (Martin and Grube 2008 [2000]:71–72). Forty-seven years later, when he dedicated Stela 38 in A.D. 593, he was a “three *k'atun* lord.” This implies that he was still younger than 60 years. He dedicated Stela 25 in A.D. 615. Stela 27, his last monument, was carved around A.D. 623. Its text describes him as a “five *k'atun* lord” (Grube and Martin 2004:30–31). All retrospective references to Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich should mention his age at death, so the Holmul frieze was carved when he was older than 40 and younger than 60, and at a time when his grandson was at least 20 years old. The dedicatory date of the frieze, therefore, was close to A.D. 593.

Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich acceded to kingship as a vassal of the *Kaanul* lord (Martin and Grube 2008 [2000]:71–72). The text on Naranjo Stela 47 emphasized his loyalty to four successive *Kaanul* kings who had reigned during his lifetime (Martin et al. 2015). The inscription on the Holmul frieze indicates that Holmul was under the sway of the *Kaanul* dynasty at least by A.D. 593, that is, well after the defeat of Tikal in A.D. 562 (Martin 2005a; Martin and Grube 2008 [2000]:39–40). It seems, however, that the rulers of Holmul chose their new allegiances at least 20 years earlier, when Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich's daughter was sent to marry Tzahb Chan Yopaat.

During the 2014 excavations, we found a partially preserved inscription painted on a wall of a substructure directly underneath the frieze structure. It included a Calendar Round date of 7 Cib 14 Ch'en, probably corresponding to September 13, A.D. 558 (Figure 3d; Estrada-Belli 2014:4, Figure 1.7). Within the same room was a plastered throne-bench and under the floor of the next room was a burial of an individual buried with 28 vessels (Figure 3e; Diaz 2012; Estrada-Belli 2012:Figures 1.20–21, 2015). Given that the bench and the tomb were positioned centrally under the image of Tz'ahb Chan Yopaat in the frieze, we think these are associated with the time of his rule and his resting place. Even though the painted inscription is largely illegible, it may in all likelihood refer to his accession date or to another crucial event of his lifetime. The A.D. 500–560 period coincides with the estimated date for the abandonment of the La Sufricaya palace (Estrada-Belli 2001b:12–13, Figures 24–30; Estrada-Belli et al. 2009:253). We therefore surmise that the individual honored in the frieze and buried under the A.D. 558 throne room may have come to power during the political turnover. This alone would probably justify the honor he received by being immortalized on the frieze. The A.D. 558 date also falls four years before the defeat of Tikal by Kaanul, when the balance of power in the lowlands markedly shifted in favor of the northern kingdom (Martin 2005b).

### Conclusions

The imagery and texts of the Holmul frieze reveal new details about how the Classic Maya conceptualized the transformation of ancestors into revered sun-like entities. The data from Holmul are particularly significant because the same ancestor is depicted as a sun-like god and then mentioned again in the accompanying genealogy of the main inscription. The scene on the Holmul frieze is also unique in its emphasis on the offering of food to the solar ancestor by two star deities or ancestral spirits, which clarifies the significance of similar representations. The glyphic names inscribed on the southern and northern walls of the Holmul structure point to the function of the building as an ancestral shrine. This idea is given further support by the placement of a

tomb buried deeply beneath the building. The frieze building was likely preceded by Tz'ahb Chan Yopaat's palace, which was filled at the time of his death around A.D. 593.

The main inscription of the frieze adds five or six previously unknown individuals to the list of Holmul rulers. Although we do not have any historical details from their reigns, the names and titles provide some important information. The reference to a "*Wiin Te' Naah* lord" carries Highland Mexican associations consistent with the cultural contact evidenced in the Early Classic imagery from the La Sufricaya palace. The use of Tikal-specific titles suggests connections to Tikal, including a rather rare parentage statement structure, in which a maternal grandfather is mentioned ahead of mother and father. Other parts of the names and titles on the Holmul frieze seem to reflect local and otherwise unique concepts and beliefs including previously unknown deities.

The titles and parentage statement of the last Holmul ruler mentioned in the inscription on the frieze indicate that, by the last quarter of the sixth century, the *chak tok wayaab* of Holmul had family ties with the Naranjo rulers and that both were under the sway of the Kaanul dynasty. This new piece of information fits the previously suggested shift in the alliances of Holmul from Tikal to Naranjo; it also indicates a broader pattern of political changes relating to the rise of Kaanul kings to overlords at the expense of Tikal. It is possible that Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich betrothed his daughter to a Holmul ruler as a way of controlling the *chak tok wayaab*, just as Kaanul princesses were sent to marry subordinate lords and oversee their domains elsewhere. The close connections between the two sites also explain the incomplete final building phase of Building A, another funerary shrine that was left unfinished after the downfall of Naranjo and the attack on Holmul by Tikal in A.D. 748.

The political relationships among Holmul, Naranjo and the Kaanul lords highlighted by the Holmul Frieze reflect broad sociopolitical processes at work in the Maya Lowlands during the Late Classic period. We now know with some confidence that, on the eve of their attack against Tikal, Kaanul kings secured an ally, Holmul, only 35 km from their enemy. In addition, it is evident, thanks to recent epigraphic data from ongoing

research at the sites of La Corona, El Perú, and El Zotz, that Kaanul kings had secured vassals on all other routes into Tikal prior to the actual attack in A.D. 562 that is detailed on Caracol Altar 21 (Canuto and Barrientos 2013; Freidel and Guenter 2003; Houston 2008; Martin 2005a; Martin and Grube 2008[2000]). The southward expansion of Kaanul likely began by at least A.D. 520, with the first marriage of a Kaanul lady to a La Corona lord (Canuto and Barrientos 2013; Martin 2008b). The watershed defeat of Tikal in A.D. 562 may then be seen not as a starting point in a struggle for hegemony between the two rival kingdoms, as hitherto implicitly suggested, but as the final step in the dismantling of the lowland-wide hegemony of Tikal by a process of expansion through conquest and intermarriage carried out by at least three consecutive Kaanul kings (Martin and Grube 1995, 2008).

The new textual evidence from La Corona (Martin 2008b), El Perú (Guenter 2014), and now Holmul reaffirms the importance of royal marriage in Maya politics (Marcus 1973). In these three cases, it appears to have served as an instrument of geopolitical control when formerly independent or otherwise aligned rulers married a princess from a foreign royal dynasty. This particular strategy may have been a Kaanul innovation that quickly became adopted more widely and was distinct from other forms of political marriage in which brides from equal rank or subjugated dynasties married into a foreign dynasty. The Holmul text implies that the marriage of the daughter of Ajnumsaaj to Tzab Chan Yopaat of Holmul was an attempt of the Naranjo king to create or consolidate his own regional hegemony in the eastern lowlands, equally satisfying his own ambitions and the interests of his Kaanul overlords. Ajnumsaaj's expansion in eastern Petén may have reached Xultun (Saturno et al. 2012) and certainly Xunantunich and Buena Vista in the Belize River Valley (LeCount and Yaeger 2010:340), while in the south it may have been limited by the proxy kingdoms of Caracol (Martin and Grube 2008:91–92). The Kaanul strategy of allowing, if not encouraging, regional hegemonies within its own broader area of influence may be at the root of the rapid emergence of regional kingdoms centered on Naranjo, Dos Pilas, Yaxchilán, Piedras Negras, Palenque, and Toniná after

the first major setback suffered by Kaanul in the late seventh century A.D.

The importance of the marriage strategy for Kaanul expansionism does not necessarily imply a peaceful process of incorporation or alliance. Textual sources tend to omit discussion of the circumstances preceding the arrival of the brides from the dominant political center. Archaeological and epigraphic data from La Corona indicate a change of ruling lineages and patron deities (Baron 2013). References to the Kaanul bride at El Perú follow a century-long hiatus in monument dedication (Guenter 2014:154). A similar gap appears in the textual record at Naranjo prior to the accession of a teenage Ajnumsaaj Chan K'inich, which might not even have taken place at Naranjo (Martin et al. 2015). The abovementioned demise of La Sufricaya implies some kind of political shift or coup at Holmul (Estrada-Belli 2001a, 2001b; Estrada-Belli et al. 2009). The new rulers at these sites seemingly lacked any motivation to discuss the details of mid-sixth century troubles. Such omissions are common in Classic Maya inscriptions and the rare exceptions are limited to contexts of dynastic restoration and subsequent retribution (Martin and Grube 2008:89–90, 164–165).

The absence of a proper emblem glyph (“X place lord”) and of the *k'uhul ajaw* (“hole/divine lord”) epithet in the titles of the Holmul rulers, who went by *chak tok wayaab* despite their lordly rank, points to the subordinate status of these rulers. It resembles the position of the lords of La Corona vis-à-vis their Kaanul overlords. La Corona rulers acceded to kingship (*ajawlel*) and yet were called *sak wayis*, instead of *k'uhul ajaw* with a dynastic emblem glyph. In contrast, the ruling families of El Perú and Naranjo, though vassals of Kaanul, retained their emblem glyphs and *k'uhul ajaw* titles. This difference suggests that some dynasties were able to retain greater autonomy and regional political aspirations. What distinguishes them from places like La Corona or Los Alacranes, for example, is that they were situated farther afield in the Kaanul hegemony.

Allegiances based on familial ties between daughter and father, grandson and grandfather—such as those between Kaanul and La Corona, or Naranjo and Holmul royals—were likely stronger than those between non-family members. La Corona remained a loyal ally even after the



demise of Kaanul kings (Stuart, Canuto, and Barrientos 2015; Stuart, Canuto, Barrientos, and Lamoureaux St-Hillaire 2015). The relationship of Holmul to the Naranjo dynasty was so close that Holmul became the target of Tikal in A.D. 748, after which Holmul remained in the Naranjo sphere for several decades longer.

During the Late Classic period, military aggression appears to have been used (and recorded) in a more selective way than previously thought. In many cases, it served as a retribution for pulling out of hegemonic alliances. Often this occurred during periods of succession at vassal kingdoms (e.g., at Naranjo after Ajnumsaaj's death; see Martin and Grube 2008:72), perhaps in response to harsh tribute obligations imposed by overlords. Even so, the Kanul hegemony lasted for about two centuries and represents a period of relative stability in the central and southern lowlands. Its demise in the first half of the eighth century A.D. reignited conflicts among regional kings. The fight for supremacy in the political vacuum left by Kaanul overlords should be considered a key factor in the balkanization and eventual collapse of political regimes in the southern Maya Lowlands in the following century.

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