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Centering the Classic Maya Kingdom of Sak Tz'i'

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we provide the results of preliminary archaeological and epigraphic research undertaken at the site of Lacanjá Tzeltal, Chiapas. Field research conducted in 2018, in collaboration with local community members, has allowed us to identify this archaeological site as the capital of a kingdom known from Classic period Maya inscriptions as “Sak Tz'i'” (White Dog). Because all previously known references to the kingdom came from looted monuments or texts found at other Maya centers, the location of the Sak Tz'i' kingdom's capital has been the subject of ongoing modeling and debate among scholars. Here we synthesize prior epigraphic and archaeological research concerning Sak Tz'i', highlighting past efforts to locate the kingdom's capital. We then discuss the results of preliminary survey, mapping, and excavations of Lacanjá Tzeltal, and present the first drawing and decipherment of Lacanjá Tzeltal Panel 1, the sculpture crucial for centering this “lost” Maya kingdom.

KEYWORDS

Mesoamerica; Maya; Classic period; Usumacinta; Sak Tz'i'; Piedras Negras; Yaxchilan; Bonampak

Introduction

Despite reports in the popular press that laud archaeologists for their discoveries of “lost” ancient cities, urban centers rarely go missing. Sprawling ruined palaces and crumbling pyramids may long escape the gaze of archaeologists and academic explorers. Such places, however, do not elude local communities for whom they may represent deeply rooted sites of patrimony, a potential economic resource, or simply a curiosity. While remote sensing technologies such as LiDAR offer us a revolutionary peek beneath the forest canopy to map the ancient landscape, most scholars recognize that advances still require on-the-ground research and documentation (e.g., Canuto et al. 2018; Chase et al. 2011, 2012; Golden et al. 2016). Most importantly, breakthrough discoveries often come as the result of collaborations with local communities and other stakeholders. Their involvement is central to our research and conservation efforts, and their contributions are too often unrecognized in the public media.

All of which brings us to the identification of a “lost” capital of the Classic Maya, that of the royal court of Sak Tz'i' (“White Dog”). The decipherment of Precolumbian Maya script has revolutionized archaeology, revealing hundreds of places, individuals, and their roles in the rich political histories of Maya kingdoms (e.g., Berlin 1958; Houston 1993; Martin and Grube 2008; Stuart and Houston 1994; Tokovinine 2013). Some of those titles are so-called “emblem glyphs.” During the Maya Classic period (A.D. 250–900), the emblem glyph functioned as an exalted epithet identifying a ruler or, more rarely, the immediate family members of the ruler (Martin and Grube 2008, 19). Such glyphs consist of a central “main sign” (which may or may not be a place name), followed by the title *ajaw*, typically translated as

“lord.” Many emblem glyphs were also prefixed by the adjectival *k'uhul* or “holy, divine,” naming the bearer as a “holy lord.” For reasons that are not fully understood, this last feature is absent in the case of the Sak Tz'i' title and those of some other dynasties. While the lordly title was modified to encompass a range of high-status individuals, emblem glyphs effectively functioned to name their bearers as the king (or, with a female modifier, as queen) of a polity. Emblem glyphs are therefore crucial for determining the location of dynastic seats, by the logic that their appearance in inscriptions will concentrate in such royal centers, especially in connection to purely local events. These actions might include, for instance, construction of pyramids and other monumental buildings, fire or incense rituals, burials, or the erection of carved monuments. At this point, following decades of decipherment and even more years of archaeological exploration across the Maya region, most documented emblem glyphs have been linked to specific ancient cities.

Yet, some emblem glyphs remain disconnected from any known ruins. This occurs especially when mention of them occurs in foreign kingdoms, and when texts are removed illicitly before they can be documented in situ. Both of these conditions apply to the Sak Tz'i' kingdom. Inscriptions at sites including Piedras Negras, Bonampak, Yaxchilan, and Tonina make reference to the rulers and nobles of Sak Tz'i', while sculptures from its capital center now reside in museums and private collections. These texts attest to the wide influence of the kingdom and its energetic role in regional politics but do not pinpoint its capital and heartland. Nonetheless, these inscriptions have provided suggestive evidence for the location of the dynastic seat of Sak Tz'i'. Almost two decades ago, Armando Anaya Hernández, Stanley

Guenther, and Marc Zender (2003) modeled the hypothetical boundaries of the Sak Tz'i' kingdom using the distribution of textual references to the dynasty, its allies, and its rivals. Their analysis suggested that the heart of the Sak Tz'i' lay west of the Usumacinta River in Chiapas, tucked into the landscape adjacent to the kingdoms of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan.

Confirming the prescience of that model, we argue that recent archaeological and epigraphic research allows us to center the dynastic seat of the Sak Tz'i' dynasty on a site near the modern community of Lacanja Tzeltal, Chiapas. Located in the core of the boundaries modeled by Anaya and colleagues, this ancient city exhibits relatively large size and monumental buildings, both consistent with the capital of a western Maya polity (Figures 1–3). Most critical to our

identification, however, are the epigraphic data found in situ, including a monument incontrovertibly depicting an 8th century A.D. ruler of Sak Tz'i'. In this article, we synthesize prior research on Sak Tz'i', highlighting past efforts to locate the kingdom's capital, and present the results of a preliminary survey of the archaeological site. We also present the first drawing and reading of Lacanja Tzeltal Panel 1, the sculpture crucial for situating this lost Maya kingdom (Figure 4; Sak Tz'i' emblem glyph appears at positions G1 and O2).

The Sak Tz'i' Dynasty

A handful of unprovenanced monuments whose primary subject is the dynasty of Sak Tz'i' are found in museums throughout Mexico and the rest of the world (Biró 2004;

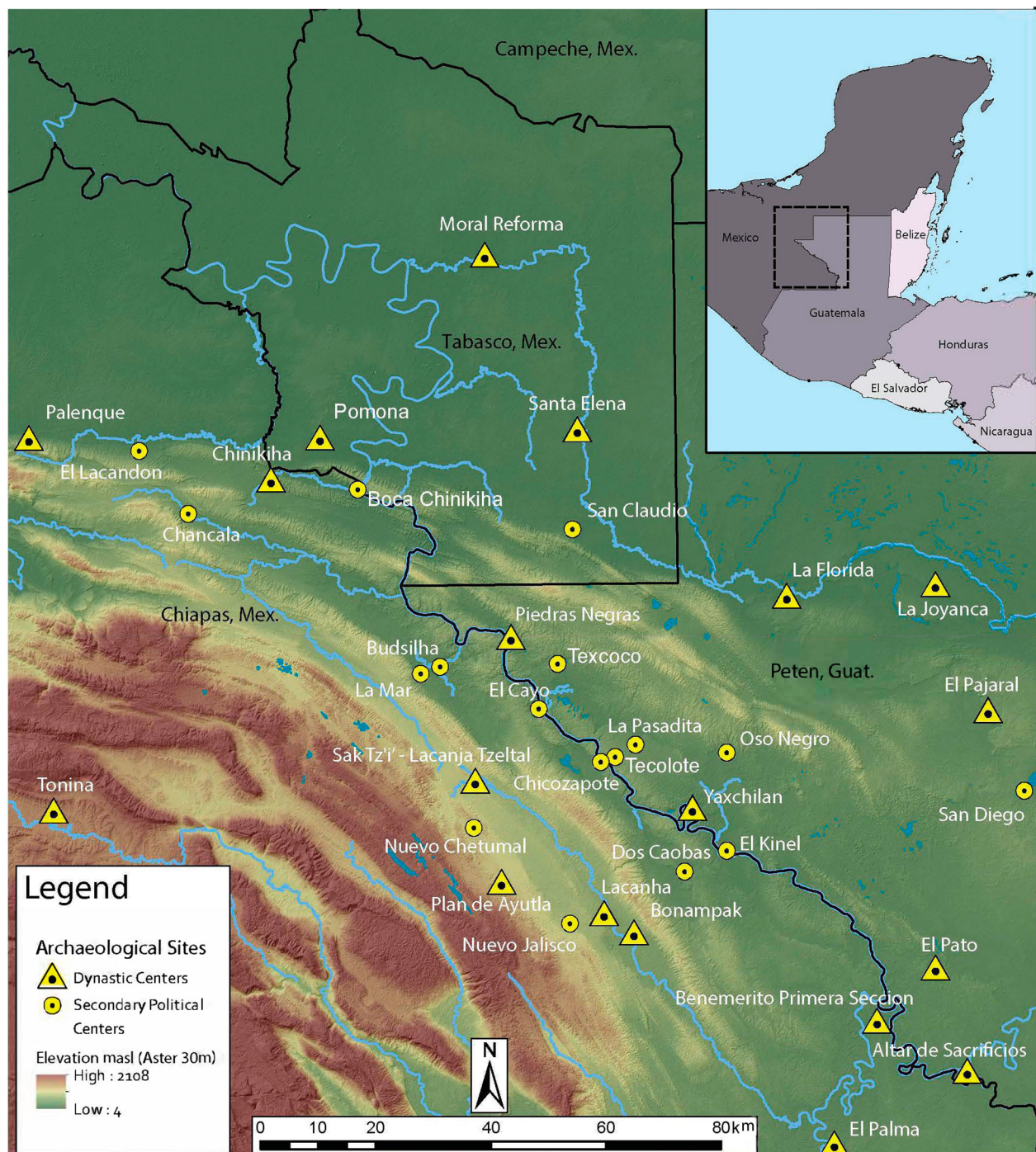


Figure 1. Regional map showing archaeological sites and modern borders (by C. Golden).

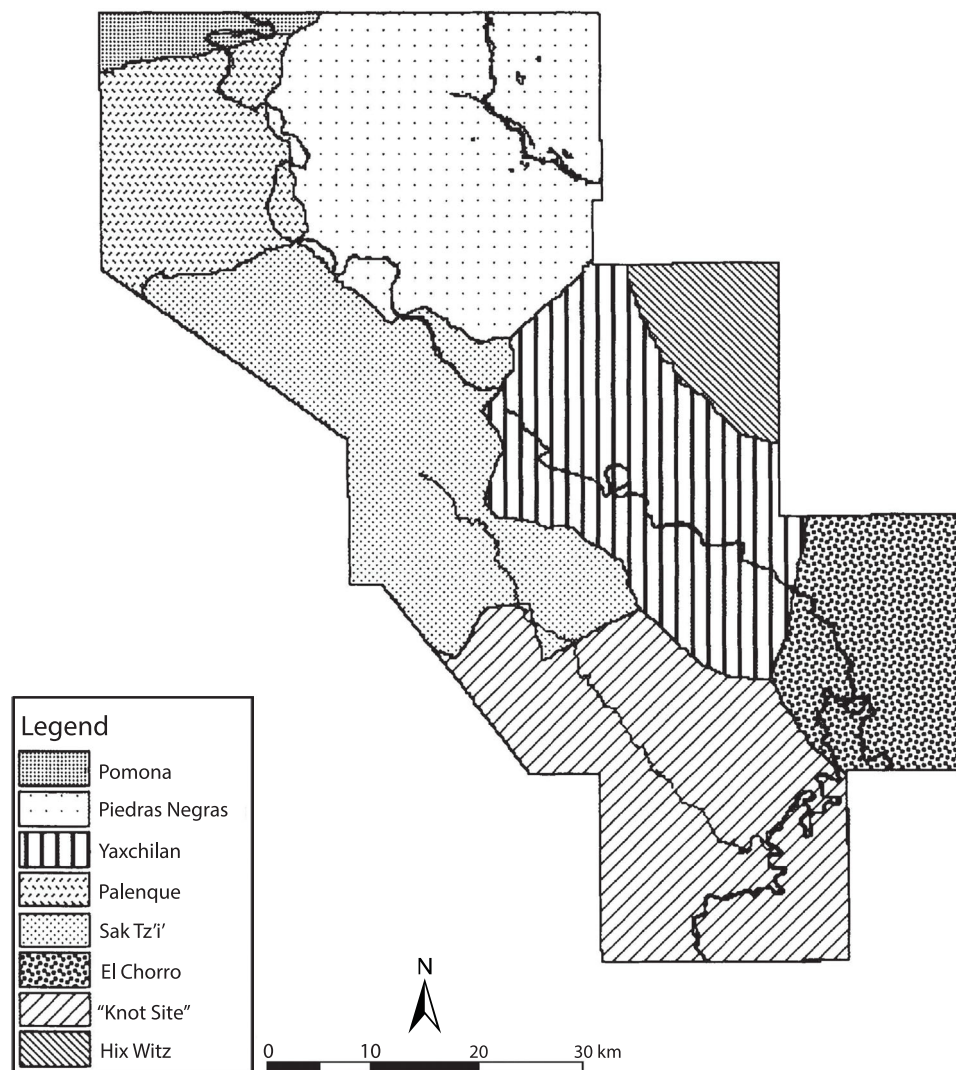


Figure 2. 8th century A.D. territories of Maya kingdoms of the Usumacinta River region as modeled by Anaya and colleagues (2003).

Table 1). That no such monuments are known from Guatemalan collections provides circumstantial evidence that the kingdom's capital was most likely in modern Chiapas, Mexico, a conclusion reached also by Anaya and colleagues (2003). The majority of references to the dynasty of Sak Tz'i' are, however, from inscriptions found in situ at other kingdoms in the Western Maya lowlands in which Sak Tz'i' lords most often appear as captives (Bíró 2004; Martin and Grube 2008, 146).

Most famous, perhaps, are Lintels 1 and 2 from Bonampak, which respectively depict Yajaw Chan Muwaan of Bonampak and Shield Jaguar IV of Yaxchilan, each seizing a cowering figure linked in some way (as a *yajawte'*, a title whose precise meaning remains enigmatic) to Yete' K'inich, a ruler of the Sak Tz'i' kingdom (Bíró 2004, 24–26). Separated by only four days, the events suggest a concentrated attack in A.D. 787 on the Sak Tz'i' dynasty or its minions. Along with another carving, Lintel 3, the two lintels support the doorways of Structure 1 and lead into its three rooms with resplendent murals. By one interpretation, these paintings depict the battle, prologue, and aftermath of a conflict with the Sak Tz'i' kingdom in which these captives were taken (Anaya Hernández, Guenter, and Zender 2003; Bíró 2004; Martin and Grube 2008; Miller and Brittenham 2013). Against this view is the fact that each carving has a distinct date, and one, on Lintel 3, possibly mentions a capture some decades before—in

other words, they allude to more than one conflict (for discussion of dates, see Miller and Brittenham [2013, 67] and Table 1 below). The lintels imply that the capital of Sak Tz'i' was within striking distance of Yaxchilan and Bonampak, perhaps one or two days' travel by foot. Yet they offer no evidence for the direction of that city.

The corpus of monuments that mention Sak Tz'i' make clear that the primary entanglements of its dynasty were with rulers of Tonina, Yaxchilan (and its 8th century vassal Bonampak), Piedras Negras, and La Mar. These were dynamic relationships. Warfare is a frequent theme, but interdynastic relationships could evolve through time to meet changing political needs and shifting alliances. For example, a Sak Tz'i' captive is shown alongside a captive Palenque lord on Piedras Negras Stela 26 in A.D. 628. The implication is that the Sak Tz'i' dynasty was allied at that time with the rulers of Palenque, and both were engaged in a conflict with the Piedras Negras kingdom (Bíró 2004, 31; Martin and Grube 2008, 142).

In the paired Denver and Brussels panels (looted, so their find site is unknown), there is a hint of shifting, even tumultuous relations. A lord from the minor kingdom of La Mar (allied to the court at Piedras Negras) is said to scatter incense or fire in the "domain" of the lord of Sak Tz'i'. This is followed a day later by an opaque sequence of events under the auspices of the Sak Tz'i' lord. The pattern of its influence over

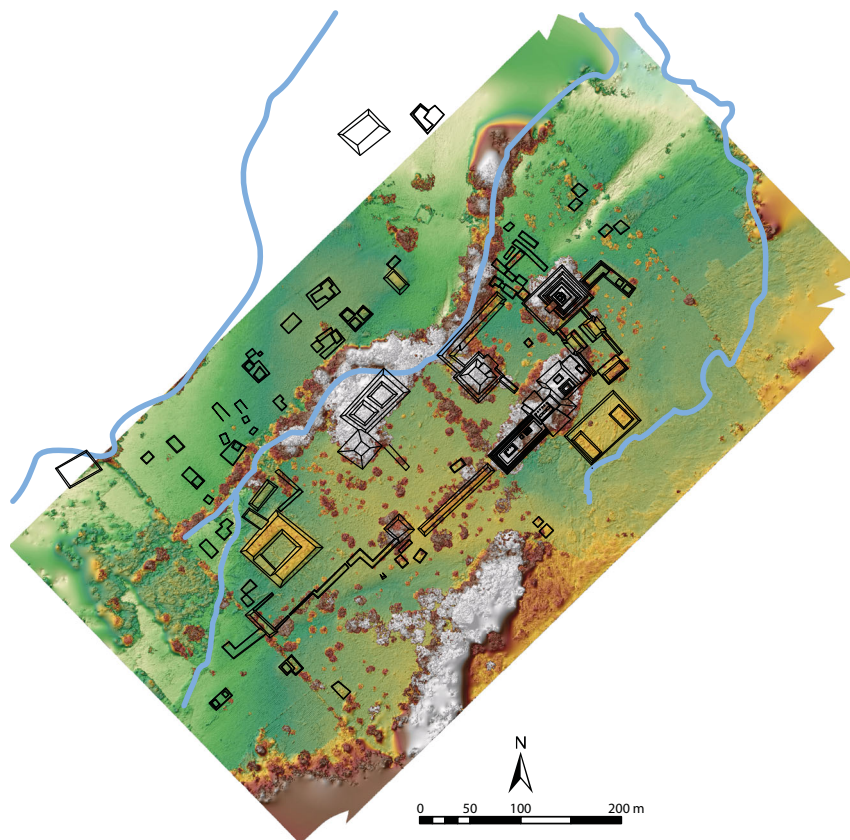


Figure 3. Map of architectural groups and stream channels at Lacanjá Tzeltal, over photogrammetric DEM (made with DJI Phantom 4 Pro and AgiSoft Metashape v. 1.5.1; by C. Golden and A. K. Scherer).

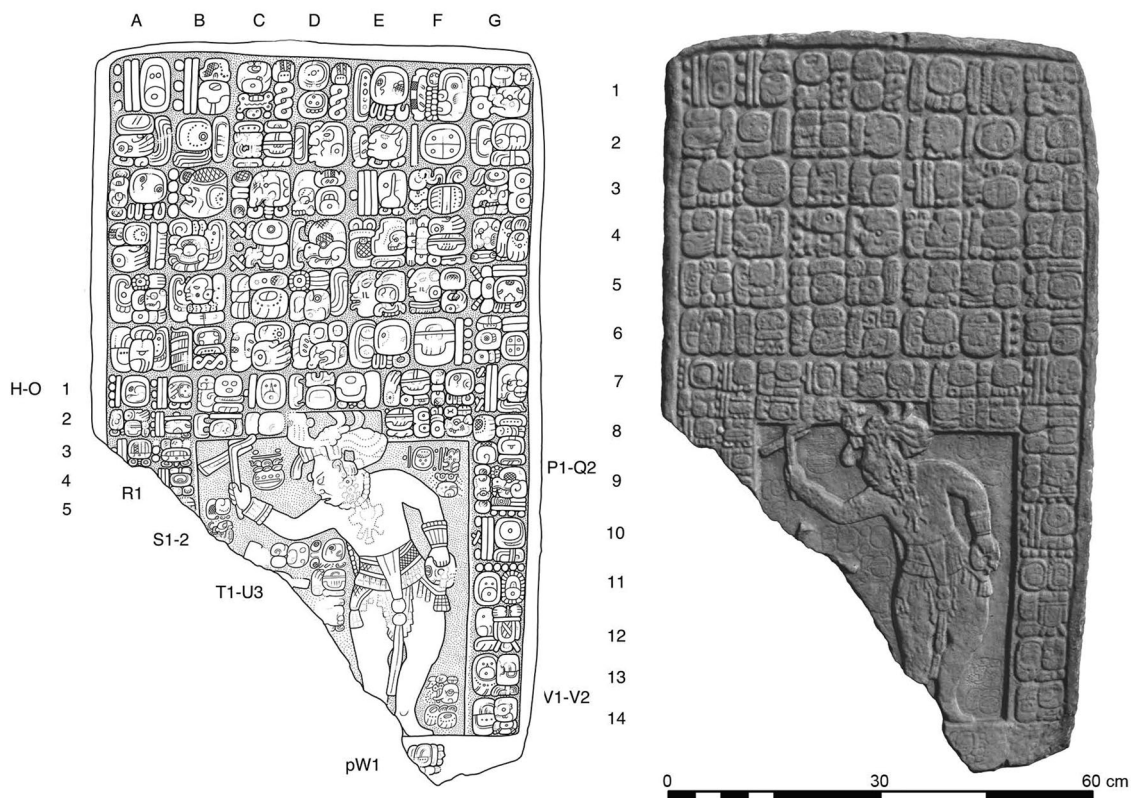


Figure 4. (left) Drawing by Stephen Houston of Panel 1 (right) 3D model of Panel 1 (by C. Golden, using Artec Eva scanner and Artec Studio 13 Professional).

lands to the south of Piedras Negras is consistent, if ambiguously so, with a battered text from El Cayo, just upriver from Piedras Negras. There, the ruler of Sak Tz'i'i is said to

supervise rituals, including, in a final passage, the burial of the lord (4 Panak) commemorated by the inscription. The sculpture probably marked his tomb. Mention of Piedras

Table 1. Known Classic period texts mentioning Sak Tz'i'. Question mark following place name indicates an unknown or insecure find provenience for the monument.

Place	Monument	Date	Description	Pub. Reference
Piedras Negras	Stela 26	A.D. 628	K'ab Kante' lord of Sak Tz'i' is a captive of Piedras Negras Ruler 2.	Anaya Hernández, Guenter, and Zender 2003, 186; Schele and Grube 1994, 111
Sak Tz'i' (?)	Denver/Brussels Panels	A.D. 641	Lord of La Mar scatters incense in the cave of Sak Tz'i'; three days later K'ab Kante' captures the lord of Ake' (Bonampak?). Lords summoned.	Biró 2004, 2-8; Houston 2014
Nuevo Jalisco (?)	Nuevo Jalisco Panel	A.D. 722	"Knot-eye Jaguar," possible ruler of Bonampak and Lacanha, appearing with K'ab Kante' of Sak Tz'i'.	Anaya Hernández, Guenter, and Zender 2003, 187
Sak Tz'i' secondary center (?)	Zurich Panel	A.D. 726	Yajawte' K'inich Chak Chij, "Bat" Ajaw, who was <i>y-ajaw</i> (possessed lord) of K'ab' Kante', Sak Tz'i' and Ak'e Ajaw.	Biró 2004, 8-11
Sak Tz'i' (?)	Caracas Panel	A.D. 756	Records multiple <i>och k'ak'</i> "Fire Enters" events between A.D. 564 and 756, most involving Sak Tz'i' rulers.	Biró 2004, 15
Yaxchilan	Stela 10	A.D. 766	Names Kan Ek', Sak Tz'i' Ajaw.	
El Cayo	Panel 1	A.D. 772	Ruler of El Cayo accedes under the supervision of Sak Tz'i' ruler, but also goes up (is exiled?) to Piedras Negras.	Anaya Hernández, Guenter, and Zender 2003, 187; Biró 2004, 20-24
Bonampak	Lintels 1 and 2	A.D. 787	Shield Jaguar IV of Yaxchilan and Yajaw Chan Muwaan II of Bonampak defeat Yete' K'inich of Sak Tz'i' in A.D. 787.	Anaya Hernández, Guenter, and Zender 2003, 187; Mathews 1980, fig. 6; Miller 1986, figs. 11, 12
Tonina	Monument 83	A.D. 796	Tonina ruler captures Jats' Tokal Ek' Hiix, Sak Tz'i' Ajaw.	Anaya Hernández 2001, 72; Biró 2004, 26-27; Martin and Grube 2008, 188-189
Sak Tz'i' secondary center (?)	Lausanne Stela	A.D. 864	Records the death and burial of Bahlam Chij Uy, a sajal of K'ab Kante' of Sak Tz'i'.	Miller and Martin 2004, 167

Negras is restricted to an eroded section of glyphs that appears to refer to a conflict (**ti jul-?**, "in spearing"), then a death (**KIM-mi**), and then the burial (**mu-ku-ja**) of an unnamed figure at El Cayo itself. This is followed by the apparent exile (**T'AB-yi**) to Piedras Negras of 4 Panak, the very figure whose burial occasioned the carving. A short time later, another lord acceded to power at El Cayo under the auspices of a Sak Tz'i' lord.

Was Sak Tz'i' at this point an ally or antagonist of Piedras Negras? Had a local lord been compelled to leave because of an attack, his position usurped by heavy-handed interference from Sak Tz'i'? If so, the involvement of Sak Tz'i' in 4 Panak's entombment is baffling. Hostility would be expected, not an invitation to witness an important ritual. By the late 8th century, we do know, at least, that Sak Tz'i' was embroiled in a conflict with the lords of Yaxchilan (the perennial nemesis of the Piedras Negras dynasty) and its allies, including the lord of Bonampak.

This brief summary of the entanglements of the rulers and nobles of Sak Tz'i' with lords of other Maya polities reminds us of the dynamic nature of Late Classic period rulership, where the royal title of *ajaw* did not necessarily signify universal access to power and authority. The nominal status of contemporary Maya states as independent kingdoms did not mask the variable power of their kings and queens. Here Maya kingdoms find parallel with the ancient poleis of Classical Greece, the Nahuatl altepetl of Postclassic Mesoamerica, the kingdoms of medieval Ireland, and many other polities worldwide (e.g., Feinman and Marcus 1998; Hansen 2000, 2002, 2006; Jaski 2000; Smith 2008). In practice, some monarchs dominated extensive, multi-polity domains while many rulers must have served as mere proxies for more powerful suzerains. The impression from the body of sculptural references is that the dynastic rulers of Sak Tz'i' never achieved the hegemonic might of courts centered at Palenque, Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan, and Tonina.

Our interest in Sak Tz'i' stems from our broader concern with Classic Maya polities in a comparative perspective (Golden et al. 2008; Golden and Scherer 2013). This collaborative team's prior work has focused chiefly on the most powerful kingdoms of the Usumacinta River region, Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan, polities whose lords could claim the

title of *k'uhul ajaw*. Sak Tz'i' provides an important point of contrast, governed by an *ajaw* (lacking the *k'uhul* honorific) and presumably smaller in size and scope of power. Nevertheless, the rulers of Sak Tz'i' were a significant local force in the western Maya area. They engaged in pragmatic relationships with their neighbors, practicing a realpolitik that saw them alternately allied or at war with their more powerful neighbors. In fact, the Sak Tz'i' dynasty may have weathered the forces of political collapse that swept the western Maya region in the early 9th century better than many of their competitors. An unprovenanced stela, now in a private collection, refers to a Sak Tz'i' nobleman in A.D. 869, many decades after the courts of Yaxchilan, Piedras Negras, and Palenque had ceased to produce monuments (Biró 2004, 30; Miller and Martin 2004, 167, fig. 51). In the Maya west, only the court of Tonina lasted longer. Nevertheless, by the end of the 9th century A.D., Sak Tz'i', too, had disappeared from glyphic texts.

With the abandonment of large centers, smaller populations persisted in the region, and some of the Chol and Lacandón populations used the title of Sak Tz'i' lord into the colonial period, perhaps a direct connection to the Classic period court. Jan de Vos (1988, 186, 262), in discussing colonial manuscripts concerning the Lacandón region of Sac Bahlan, notes that several 17th century reports name a lord known as Zactzi or Sactzi among local leaders. It seems probable that local place names and associated titles persisted in community memory for centuries after the political collapse of urban centers in the 9th century A.D. (Rice and Rice 2018).

Despite these well-known epigraphic data, the capital center of Sak Tz'i' has heretofore eluded secure archaeological discovery. As noted above, Anaya and colleagues (2003) employed GIS to predict the location of Sak Tz'i' from geospatial patterning of inscriptions, with the suggestion that it lay south of La Mar and northwest of Bonampak, likely in the Lacanja river valley or adjacent portions of the Santo Domingo valley just to the north. Dmitri Beliaev and Alexander Safronov (2009) come to similar conclusions but place Sak Tz'i' slightly further north, somewhere just west of La Mar. The only direct archaeological research comes from Luis Alberto Martos López (2005, 2009). His investigations at the imposing site of Plan de Ayutla, Mexico, appeared to

confirm the location predicted by Anaya and colleagues (2003). Unfortunately, no in situ inscriptions at Plan de Ayutla connect it with the Sak Tz'i' dynasty, although it is difficult to imagine that text-bearing monuments did not once occur at the site. As with many carvings in the region, these could easily have been hauled away in previous decades for sale to dealers and collectors.

Thus, we remain agnostic about the identification of Plan de Ayutla as the capital of Sak Tz'i'. The city could have been one of multiple capitals of the kingdom during the Classic period, its dynasty changing seats over the centuries. There are numerous examples of shifting Maya capitals, including the movement of the Kaan dynasty from Dzibanche to Calakmul (Martin and Velásquez García 2016), the shift in the Hix Witz dynasty from El Pajal to Zapote Bobal (Stuart 2003), and the splinter Tikal dynasty that established itself first at Dos Pilas and then also at Aguateca (Houston 1993). Alternatively, Plan de Ayutla may have been the seat of the missing Ak'e court (Beliaev and Safronov 2009).

Locating Sak Tz'i' at Lacanjá Tzeltal still places it within the area predicted by Anaya and colleagues (2003) and is equally consistent with proposals by Beliaev and Safronov (2009). An initial visit to Lacanjá Tzeltal confirmed the remains of a significant political center. The monumental core covers 25 ha, larger than the 16 ha of monumental architecture at Plan de Ayutla and the 21 ha of the mapped portion of Bonampak. More critical for its identification, the surface of the site retains the remnants of dozens of sculptures including altars, stelae, and other forms. Many of these bear the scars of looter saws or erosion that prevents us from reading the texts they once bore.

Among these carvings, however, one well-preserved, largely complete stone sculpture that we have designated Panel 1 has been found that names the central figure as the ruler of the Sak Tz'i' kingdom. Before describing that monument and its setting, a note on nomenclature: we prefer that the complete site name be given as Sak Tz'i'-Lacanjá Tzeltal. This cumbersome title recognizes the possibility that Plan de Ayutla may also have been a Sak Tz'i' capital or at least part of the kingdom. It also acknowledges a proximity to the modern community of Lacanjá Tzeltal and minimizes confusion with the nearby archaeological site of Lacanha. In this essay we shorten the name of the archaeological site to Lacanjá Tzeltal, while discussing the ancient royal court and its greater dominion as Sak Tz'i'.

Archaeological Background

In 1998, INAH archaeologist Gabriel Laló Jacinto (1998) visited a large site in *ejido* (communally held) lands on the outskirts of the modern town of Lacanjá Tzeltal in the municipality of Ocosingo, Chiapas. Given the scale of the site and the carved monuments, Laló Jacinto recognized that these ruins represented the remains of a significant ancient city requiring further research. Nonetheless, he reported that he was unable to continue investigations due to local disagreements about land tenancy and community interests. In our own discussions with the current landowner, he emphasized the complexities of the local political situation at the time and stated that this was the central reason that investigations were not conducted in decades past, despite interest from all parties.

To the best of our knowledge, between 1998 and 2014 no archaeologists visited the site and no further documentation of the site was conducted. In 2014, Whittaker Schroder was engaged in regional archaeological survey as part of the Proyecto Arqueológico Busiljá-Chocoljá when acquaintances of the current landowner approached him about the possibility of a visit. The latter had recently finalized the disposition of the ranch where the site is located, and was interested in pursuing collaborations with archaeologists. Schroder and Jeffrey Dobereiner soon initiated discussions with the landowner. Charles Golden and Andrew Scherer subsequently reconnoitered the site, presenting the results of that initial site reconnaissance and a preliminary map in an official report to Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in 2015 (Scherer et al. 2015).

Building on those initial advances, Golden and Scherer engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the landowner that led, in June 2018, to preliminary mapping and excavations (Scherer and Golden 2018). It is primarily the results of that preliminary work that is reported here. A more concerted program of investigations was initiated in 2019, and the results of that research will appear in future publications. As part of the 2019 efforts, Mallory Matsumoto, building on an initial inventory by Golden and Scherer, and colleagues, recorded 27 stelae, one panel, eleven altars, eleven miscellaneous stone sculptures, ten unclassified monuments (short, blocky monuments whose function and original placement we have yet to determine), and no fewer than twelve fragments that cannot currently be associated with the other carvings. This tally constitutes a minimum number only, as complete counts are difficult with fragmentary and partially interred carvings. Exposure to rain, fire from burning of agriculture and pasture, looting, and the growth of vegetation have destroyed most details of texts and imagery. However, Panel 1 bears the well-preserved depiction of a local ruler accompanied by a nearly complete inscription. Stephen Houston has drawn that monument and interpreted its text, which, as detailed below, focuses on ritual, mythic, and genealogical information from the Sak Tz'i' dynasty. This inscription provides the most secure evidence to date that the archaeological site of Lacanjá Tzeltal was the dynastic capital of the Sak Tz'i' dynasty for at least a significant part of the Late Classic period.

In a fascinating exchange with the landowner concerning the likelihood that the site was once the capital of the Sak Tz'i' dynasty, he reported visits from a Lacandón man from the nearby community of Lacanjá Chansayab who arrived at his home on multiple occasions looking specifically for Sak Tz'i', identifying it as the home of his ancestors. The visitor then proceeded to lead the landowner to the site we identify as the Classic period seat of Sak Tz'i'. The preservation of Classic period place names into contemporary times is not without precedent, with perhaps the most clear-cut case being Yaxha, "Green-blue Water," a name inscribed on the emblem glyph of the eponymous site and applied to the adjacent lake since Precolonial times (Stuart 1985).

Site Overview

It is important to note that the site is not open to public access. All buildings are located on private land, and to enter without permission is illegal and unethical. The modern community of Lacanjá Tzeltal sits in a broad valley just west

of the Sierra Cojolita. The valley floor is about six kilometers wide, with rugged karst hills demarcating its northeast and southeast boundaries. Additional smaller karst cones periodically break up the valley floor. On the road from the modern community of Lacanjá Tzeltal to the site one observes architecture and mounds scattered across a landscape marked by a mosaic of milpa, cattle pastures, and small patches of preserved forest. Settled in the Mid-Twentieth Century by Tzeltal Maya speakers from Ocosingo, the area also courses with streams that join near the town to form the headwaters of the Lacanjá River, thus giving the community its name.

The epicenter of the site can be accessed by walking southeast from the highway linking Lacanjá Tzeltal to the neighboring town of Cintalapa. Mounds are visible across much of this landscape, and local residents report ancient structures in the surrounding hills, suggesting an area of continuous, but probably low density, settlement. Since our work has focused only on the epicenter of the site at Lacanjá Tzeltal, we have yet to confirm these preliminary and anecdotal observations. Ongoing analysis of LiDAR data and pedestrian survey will provide additional details in coming years.

The monumental center of the site is approximately 500 m in length, from the southwest to the northeast. It comprises a series of masonry buildings built atop an elevated platform that underlies most of the site. Preliminary excavations indicate that the initial construction of the underlying platform dates to no later than the Middle Preclassic period, possibly as early as 750 B.C. or as late as 450 B.C. This broad estimate derives at present from the identification of Mamón phase ceramics, including three whole vessels analyzed under the supervision of Socorro Jiménez. These same excavations suggest that occupation and construction activity saw a significant drop at the end of the Preclassic period, before significant reoccupation and construction in the Late Classic period from the 7th through at least the beginning of 9th century A.D.

In recent decades past, milpa (swidden) agriculture dominated the landscape in and around the site, and maize, beans, and squash are still occasionally farmed among the ruins; however, the area is now primarily given over to cattle pasture. For the most part, the land is cleared of forest, with the exception of secondary growth covering most of the main architectural groups. The map presented here results from ground reconnaissance, tape-and-compass measurements, and photogrammetric models developed from imagery collected by DJI Phantom 4 drones and processed using Agisoft Photoscan software. The map and building designations are a work in progress, and although representative of the site layout, they are preliminary. More detailed, precise, and accurate mapping of the site using a total station in combination with airborne and UAV-mounted LiDAR systems is ongoing.

Three principal patios that formed the residential and ritual zones for the community's elite inhabitants define the architectural core of the site (Figures 5 and 6). At the southwesterly end of the epicenter lies a palace complex composed of a series of once-vaulted buildings surrounding a restricted access courtyard. This represents the limit of major architecture. We have temporarily designated the palace D6-15, but the complex requires a more detailed survey to delimit individual superstructures and platforms, each of which will need its own designation. Thus far, no carved monuments have

been located within this group, and the landowner insists that no sculptures were visible around D6-15 in the recent past. However, a large square altar with legs, lacking visible carvings, is prominently placed – apparently in situ – at the northern corner of the complex. There is considerable sacking in one of the buildings near the creek along the northwestern edge of the palace complex, undermining the architecture of the platform. Other than the wall of an outer platform, which has at least one construction phase, we were unable to distinguish room spaces, burial architecture, or other distinctive architectural features in the looters' cut. The spatial separation of the palace from the pyramid complexes and Acropolis to the northeast is distinct and warrants further consideration once more detailed mapping of the site is completed.

To the northeast of D6-15 is a wide plaza we have named "Plaza Ts'ahk" in consultation with the landowner, using the Tzeltal word *ts'ahk* for "wall." The plaza is scattered, with low platforms only a few courses of stone high and what appear to be meandering wall bases. High grass has so far prevented more detailed mapping of these poorly defined constructions. Their function is unclear, as is their dating; they could be coeval with, or postdate, the more imposing structures that surround them. Plaza Ts'ahk is bounded on the southeast by the masonry wall that gives the name to the plaza. Built of cut stone, the wall still stands at least a meter high, and we strongly suspect it was once topped by a wooden palisade. There is at least one gate in the wall (between Structures D6-10 and D6-11), and the feature jogs at least twice on its run from Structure D6-5 to E6-1.

On the northwestern side of Plaza Ts'ahk, a stream demarcates the edge of the plaza and cuts downward into an increasingly deep, steep-sided ravine. At the northeastern boundary of the plaza is a pyramid, D5-22, that forms a distinct complex of linked buildings that might include palatial residential spaces or ritual enclosures. The grouping of a pyramid with auxiliary structures is reminiscent of similar complexes at Piedras Negras. However, details are lacking without further mapping and excavation.

To the northeast of Str. D5-22 is "Plaza Ohlil" (Central Plaza) bounded to the southeast by Structure E5-17, a long, tall platform of unknown function, to the northwest by the stream, and to the northeast by the back of the pyramid E5-13. Just southwest of E5-13 is a heap of fragmented monuments adjacent to an area excavated in decades past, probably to create a water tank for cattle. The majority of these fragments appear to come from stelae, although there may also be fragments of altars and panels. Some pieces have only flat surfaces, suggesting that these were always smooth stelae or altars, though they also may be monuments that were never completed. One of the fragments within this group had a highly eroded but still visible human figure, distinguishable mostly by its feet.

Excavation and organization of the fragments is required to determine how many monuments are present among this pile. It is clear that the monuments are not in their original Classic period positions, but whether they were moved in antiquity, the historic past, or more recent times remains unresolved. We strongly suspect that they were once placed along the base of Structure E5-4. Some of the fragments were cut with saws, likely decades ago to judge from the extent of weathering. This hints that at least some fragments

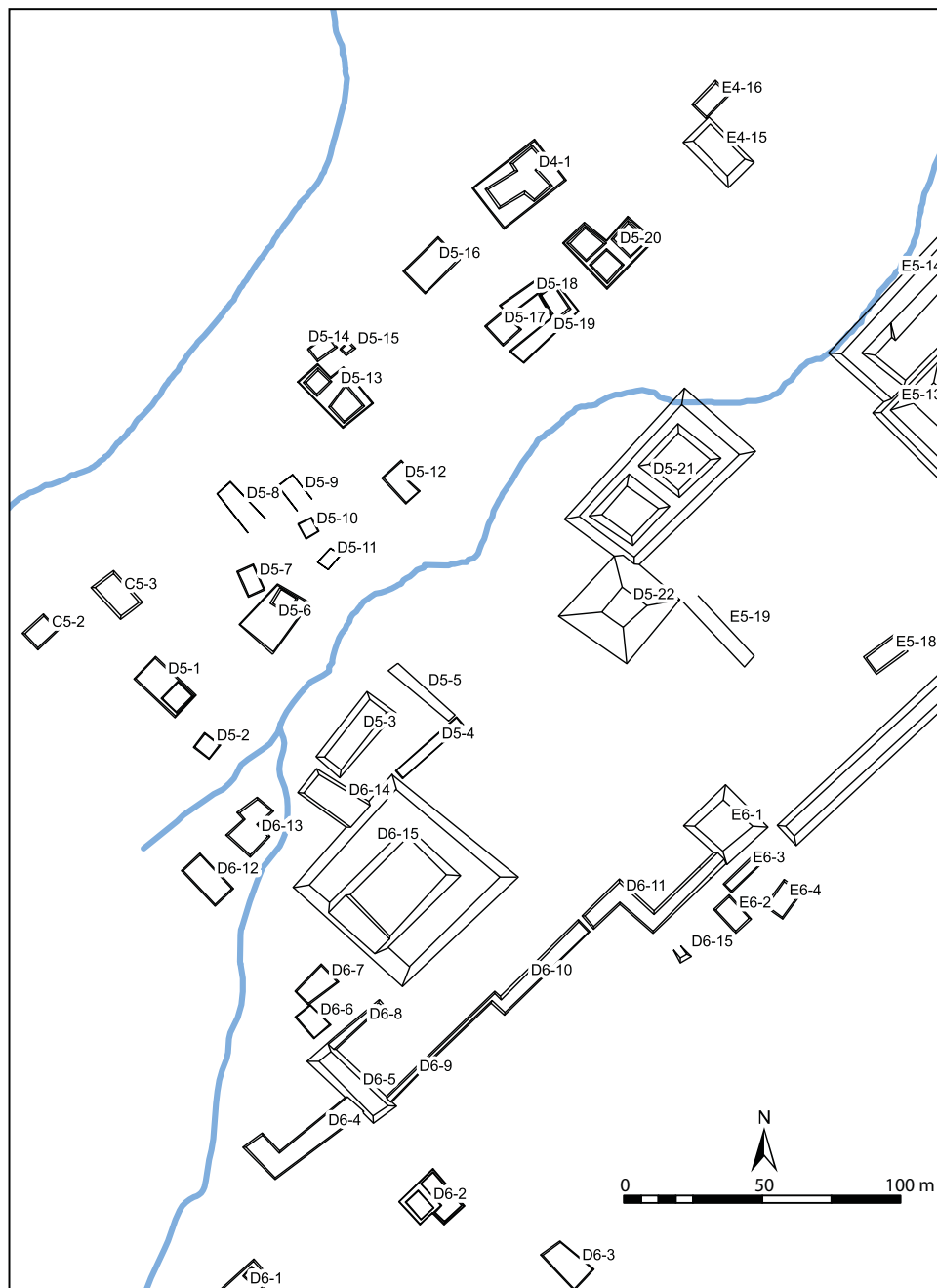


Figure 5. Labeled architectural units in the southwestern half of Lacanjá Tzeltal (by C. Golden and A. K. Scherer).

of these monuments were removed from the site sometime in the second half of the twentieth century.

Northwest of Structure E5-13, “Plaza Muk’ul Ton” (Monuments Plaza) constitutes the politico-ritual heart of the site. The staircase of the basal platform of E5-13 is well preserved, and forms a low, wide entry to a platform from which the pyramid rises. The staircase of the main pyramidal structure is still evident beneath the rubble of the architectural collapse and foliage, though we cannot say precisely how many treads and risers were originally present, nor how many terraces form the body of the pyramid. A large trench bisects the rear of the building, largely obliterating the form of the temple superstructure, though we surmise that it closely resembles the temple atop Structure E4-1 (see below).

A number of eroded or plain monuments are associated with Structure E5-14. Stela 2 is a columnar monument with a badly eroded royal figure and text, the head and face of

the king sawn away. The smooth, discoidal Altar 2 is located on the central axis of E5-13, in front of its basal platform. Stela 6 is located near the north corner of the front facade of E5-1, and is associated with Altar 3. Stela 7 is located just northwest, near the corner of the plaza formed by E5-13 and Structure E5-14. Stela 5 lies on the basal platform near the central axis of the pyramid, roughly in line with Stela 2. Stelae 3 and 4 are also found on the basal platform, with Stela 4 a few meters to the northwest of Stela 5, and Stela 3 is approximately one meter northwest of Stela 4.

Structure E5-13 is connected on its northwest side to a long L-shaped building, E5-14, which presents a series of rooms whose roofs were built of perishable materials. We do not know if E5-14 represents a single superstructure or several, or what function it had. Another cluster of eroded monument fragments sits in a plaza near the “elbow” of the L formed by E5-14.

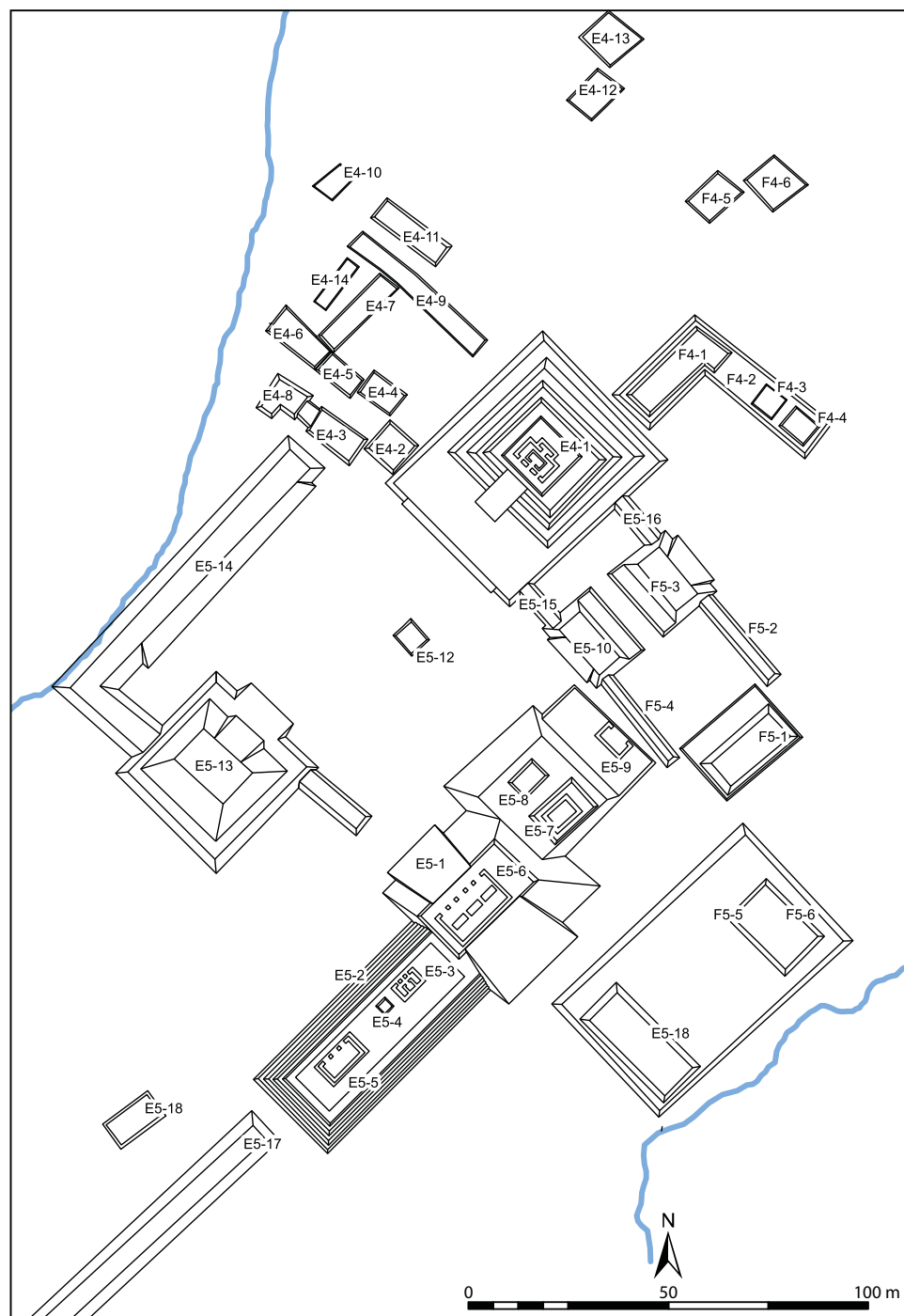


Figure 6. Labeled architectural units in the northeastern half of Lacanjá Tzeltal (by C. Golden and A. K. Scherer).

At the northeastern side of the Monuments Plaza is the most impressive pyramid of the site, Structure E4-1. Despite a broad and deep trench cut into the northeastern side of the pyramid, the body of the structure's basal and pyramidal platforms are generally well preserved. As with E5-13, a broad, low platform faces southwest and provides the basal structure from which the pyramid rises. At least one eroded monument, Miscellaneous Stone Sculpture 8, was originally inset near the northwestern edge of the staircase of the basal platform. Still largely buried under rubble from the platform, MSS 8 seems to be a small, rectangular monument covered in a text that sadly is now eroded beyond legibility.

At the base of the staircase for the pyramid itself, there were originally at least two stelae placed where the staircase meets the body of the building. To the northwest of the

staircase is Stela 16. At some point in centuries past, Stela 16 toppled backwards, exposing its carved surface to rainfall that has erased most details of its imagery and glyph blocks, although we can still discern the vague outlines of human figures arranged in multiple vertical registers. We cannot say, however, if these registers formed a single scene or multiple scenes. Stela 12 once stood along the southeastern edge of the staircase, until rubble falling from above pushed it forward nearly to the ground. Although protected from erosion by its face down position, the well-conserved imagery of Stela 12 attracted looters, who cut away and carried off its upper half, leaving only the lower bodies of supplicant lords kneeling before their ruler (Figure 7). The soles of the feet of these obeisant nobles face outward towards the viewer, in an unusual depiction otherwise featured only on a few Maya vases.

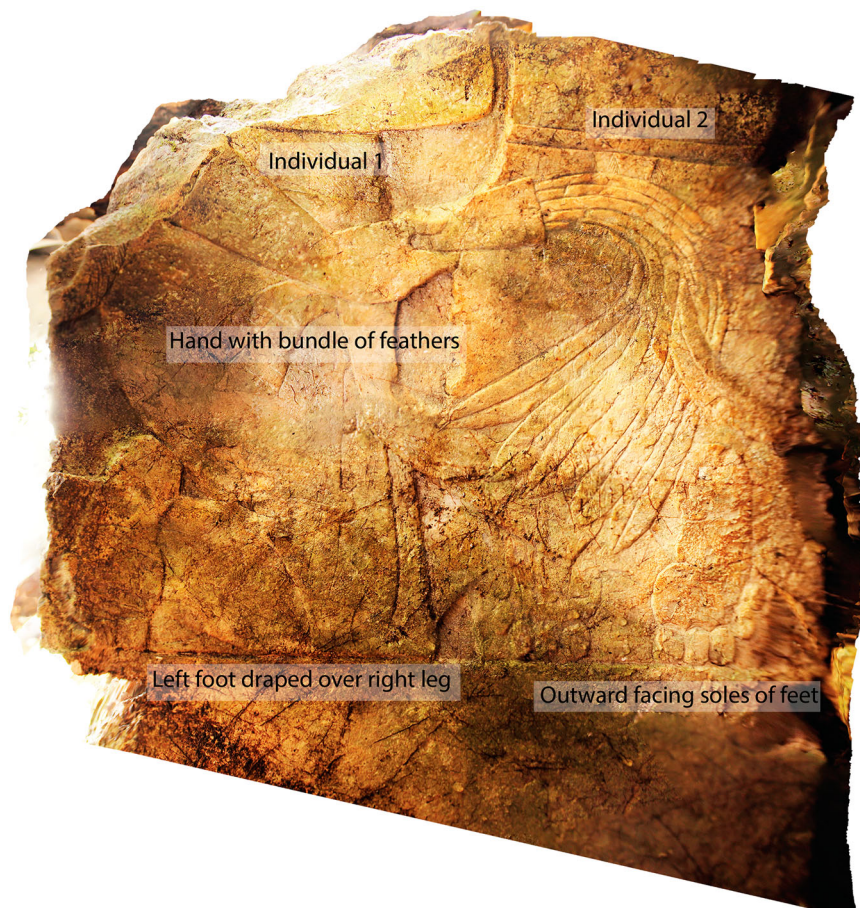


Figure 7. Photogrammetric composite (made using Agisoft Metashape v.1.5.1) of lower portion of Stela 12, Lacanjá Tzeltal. Photos taken beneath the toppled monument fragment. Remainder of the monument was sawn off and is no longer on site (from photos by C. Golden, A. K. Scherer, G. V. Kollias, and M. Talavera).

Although no calendrical inscriptions are preserved, the details of lashed, overlapping belts or servage in the costuming hint at a date in the final decades of the Late Classic period (Houston 1989, 17–22, fig. 5; see also K558, K1180; and K1392 in Kerr 1998).

The main pyramidal platform of E4-1 rises up from the basal platform in three large terraces before reaching a peak where a temple superstructure sits atop a low platform or stylobate. A massive trench was cut into the back of the pyramid and into the rear wall of the rear room of the superstructure. Despite that damage, it is possible to distinguish a once-vaulted building with an antechamber containing a distinct ritual precinct and a smaller rear room, a form reminiscent of the temple superstructures from the Cross Group at Palenque (Barnhart 2001; Houston 1996; Robertson 1991). It seems that such temples are typical of Lacanjá Tzeltal, with the superstructures of D5-22 and E5-13, although damaged by illicit excavations, obviously similar.

To the northwest side of Structure E4-1 is an area of low platforms, which may represent a residential space, although we hypothesize that this was an area of workshops or market-stalls. We base this supposition on little archaeological evidence beyond the form and layout of the architecture, which is reminiscent of areas identified as market zones at other contemporary sites (e.g., Cap 2011, 2015; Chase and Chase 2014; Dahlin et al. 2007; Shaw 2012). Southeast of E4-1 is the principal ballcourt of the site, with a central area approximately 55 m long, delimited to the northwest by the basal platform of E4-1, and to the southeast of F5-1.

The primary axis of the ballcourt seems to be slightly askew from the axis of E4-1 or the Acropolis, though we cannot yet say whether this apparent divergence from the broader site patterns was the intent of the builders or is the result of architectural collapse. The shape of the ballcourt, with its enclosed “endzones” and large platform at one end, is reminiscent of other sites in the region and the adjacent Chiapas highlands, including Chinkultic, Plan de Ayutla, and Chini-kiha (Ball 1980; Martos López 2005, 5; Liendo Stuardo 2006, fig. 2).

On the southeast side of the Monuments Plaza is the Acropolis of Lacanjá Tzeltal, a complex of platforms and superstructures presenting the highest architectural point of the site. Local residents report that there was once a line of stelae along the front of the Acropolis, most of which are now either buried in rubble or were sawn up and carried away for illicit sale. We define the front of the Acropolis as its northwestern face looking on to the Monuments Plaza, although a staircase also descends from the Acropolis on its southeastern side.

We found Stela 1, badly eroded though depicting a front-facing ruler carrying a bicephalic bar, located under foliage along the southwestern edge of the Acropolis, nearest Structure E5-13. Altar 1 is also nearby, though there is a possibility that it has been moved to its present location more recently and is therefore not necessarily related to Stela 1. The landowner also found a jaguar head made of stucco over an armature of stone and several fragments of red and blue painted stucco molding amid the building rubble. These surviving fragments demonstrate the need to carry out meticulous

excavations of debris heaps in future field seasons, since they may contain similar stuccos. Stela 11 lies northeast of Stela 1, covered in rubble thrown down from looters' pits cut into the architecture above. Just north of Stela 11 is Stela 10, which is broken into three pieces. Stela 8 is a large column a few meters away sitting in the open grass of the plaza. All of these monuments likely bore text and royal imagery, some of which is still vaguely visible despite mutilation by looters.

Structure E5-6 was once, apparently, a double galleried and vaulted structure, of the kind consistent with palatial reception halls of the Usumacinta region. The superstructure collapsed in recent decades, brought down by tree roots and significant illicit digging that has left trenches on the northwest and southeast of its E5-1 platform. However, it is still possible to distinguish the overall form of E5-6, and its masonry is in good condition in some parts. Structure E5-6 presented five doors to the northwest side and three pillars in its central axis, forming a building with two corridors similar to the palaces of Piedras Negras or Budsilhá.

The staircases built on the northwest side and southeast side of the Acropolis extended from the base of the E5-1 platform to the base of the E5-6 superstructure. Taking advantage of the work of looters, which has exposed much of the construction sequence beneath both staircases, Scherer and Golden were able to make photogrammetric models revealing details of construction episodes. Test excavations at the bottom of the looters' trench through the northwestern staircase quickly exposed buried earthen platforms associated with pottery dating to perhaps 400 or 450 B.C., providing the earliest evidence of occupation at the site (Talavera and Kollias 2018). All of the major surface, visible architecture, however, appears to date to the Classic period. In the trench cuts, we are able to distinguish three large terraces that make up the bulk of the E5-1 platform, with the stairway built over them. Monuments once sat on these terraces, and the butt of Stela 15, with clean lines visible from the saws used to remove its upper portion, remains in place on the middle terrace. The northwest side of E5-1 presents a single construction phase, but in the cut of the southeast side is evidence of at least two building stages.

To the southwest of the E5-1/E5-6 complex is a lower, long platform, Structure E5-2. This building rises up in three terraces to support a broad platform with three superstructures: E5-3, E5-4, and E5-5. Largely collapsed, with some evidence of looting, Structure E5-3 was a small, vaulted temple space reminiscent of the larger temples atop the site's pyramids. Here, too, a larger outer chamber enclosed a smaller internal room space. We cannot currently distinguish much of the form of E5-4, though we suspect that it also represents a small ritual chamber like E5-3, or perhaps it more closely resembled the small one-room temples in the acropolises of Bonampak or Plan de Ayutla. The collapsed masonry covering the form of E5-5 makes it difficult to understand its form or function, though it was clearly a vaulted building with three doorways and, possibly, a single interior room space.

To the northeast of E5-6, the Acropolis descends through a series of platforms and superstructures. The remains of the superstructures of E5-7 and E5-8 are badly damaged by looting and tree falls, exposing at least two construction phases. Some of the masonry in association with E5-7 exhibits rounded corners and apron moldings often associated with

Early Classic (A.D. 250–600) architecture, and our team has recovered some sherds of Early Classic pottery in the course of excavations adjacent to the ballcourt (Jiménez Álvarez et al. 2018a, 2018b).

At the southeastern base of Structure E5-1 is a broad, low platform (F5-5) with two smaller platforms on top (E5-18 and F5-6) forming a patio group. We do not know the function of these platforms; however, we suspect that they form part of the architectural complex that includes the Acropolis and the ballcourt. On the outskirts of the site core are abundant platforms forming patio groups that probably represent residential areas of the Classic period.

The three principal plazas of Lacanjá Tzeltal are arranged on a long southwest-northeast axis of approximately 45 to 48 degrees azimuth. The major buildings of the site are oriented with their facades facing along, or perpendicular to, the principal axis of the site. We have argued elsewhere that the orientation of burials in the Usumacinta River region, which generally conform to the principal architectural axes of capital centers, had ritual significance and was integral to the expression of community identity (Golden et al. 2008). Thus, at Piedras Negras the preference was for burials arranged along 30 degrees azimuth. At Yaxchilan the preferred orientation was, instead, 120 degrees azimuth. It remains to be seen if the orientation of burials at Lacanjá Tzeltal will follow the long axis of the site, or perhaps instead the angle perpendicular to that axis.

The waterway that bounds the northwestern edge of the epicenter is cut into a deep ravine that existed prior to the occupation of the site. This, together, with the other streams that delimit the core must have shaped the orientation of the site and the location and arrangement of its principal plazas. Yet, the builders of Lacanjá Tzeltal did not simply follow the natural landscape, and there is evidence that they manipulated these watercourses. In the ravine, local residents find cut blocks eroding from the walls of the streambed, suggesting that masonry was used to maintain this channel and direct the stream. Small, naturally formed travertine dams form pools in the streambed, and small cut blocks arrayed about the edges of these pools suggest that ancient residents likely modified them to better hold water during periods of low rainfall.

Further, the area to the southeast of the Acropolis floods periodically, and we have been told that in previous decades it held water perennially. It is possible that the ancient residents excavated a water storage basin (*aguada*) there, or that water was diverted from the stream to flow southeast away from the principal plazas of the site. A gully runs north of E4-1, bounded on either side by E4-12 and F4-5. No water regularly flows there today, and it may have been formed naturally prior to the monumental construction of Lacanjá Tzeltal. We suspect, however, that it may also constitute part of a modified feature that diverted water away from the major architectural complexes during the Classic period. Beyond these initial observations about the waterways, we have some preliminary insights into ancient environmental conditions from macrobotanical and microbotanical analyses of excavated samples. These have yielded ruderal and weedy taxa (*Asteraceae* spp., *Lamiaceae* spp., *Hedeoma* sp., *Rivina humilis*, *Vitaceae* sp.), woody taxa (including *Moraceae* spp.), one milpa domesticate (*Zea mays*), and two horticultural favorites (*Piper hispidum*, *Byrsonima crassifolia*) (Morrell-Hart et al. 2018).

The organization of the architecture at Lacanjá Tzeltal suggests a concern with defense against enemy attack. A system of walls protects those parts of the site core not otherwise enclosed by large buildings, and a ravine delimits the north-western edge of the epicenter. The impression is that Lacanjá Tzeltal was among the most overtly fortified polity centers in the western Maya area. Indeed, its dynamically fluctuating enmities and alliances accord with a kingdom imperiled through much of its history. We will be conducting further research in upcoming field seasons to better document the timing of the construction of the city's walls, but preliminary excavations place their initial development broadly in the Late Classic period based on their articulation with platforms dated through ceramic analysis. Future research will include additional mapping, documentation of architecture exposed in looters' trenches, and stratigraphic excavations to describe and explain the spatial concepts that frame the royal architecture of the ancient city.

Preliminary Interpretation of Panel 1

Most of the monuments identified to date suffered cuts made by chainsaws or manual logging saws used to thin them, with the finest fragments hauled off to museums or private collections. Measurements from monument carcasses at the site may eventually allow connections to those pieces. Of the carvings spared from the looters' saws most are severely eroded by centuries of rainfall, and the exuberant growth of moss and other flora, rendering image and text largely illegible. What remain are the vague outlines of human figures holding ceremonial bars or the outlines of glyph blocks.

Panel 1 is a singular exception to these patterns of loss and destruction. The landowner found the monument onsite at the base of the Acropolis complex (Structure E5-1), where it had been exposed by looters. It has a broken lower left corner but is otherwise in excellent condition, and is currently stored in a weatherproof, off-site location, to prevent further damage. The panel reveals an active, dancing, royal figure and, most important, presents an extensive and legible inscription. There are four textual components to the sculpture. From its size and configuration, and comparison with other more eroded examples from the site, we argue that the monument was a panel originally set into the architectural façade of the Acropolis.

The first component of the inscription, Text 1 (A1-G5), displays 50 glyph blocks that fill the top half of the sculpture, as well as a single column that passes down the right side of the monument. Text 2 (H1-O2) comprises approximately 34 blocks of smaller characters that do not line up with Text 1. This second text encircles the dancing figure, running at first down the left side of the monument before continuing laterally over the top of the monument's protagonist. At least some of Text 2's message is lost in the missing triangular fragment at the monument's bottom corner, a piece that may be still be onsite and recoverable in excavation. Text 3 (P1-V2) is formed by 12 glyphs in the pictorial field itself. This text exhibits a distinct style, one that is incised and near-calligraphic in its execution—perhaps this part of the inscription came from a different carver. The final section, Text 4 (W1), is located at the base of the monument and is of uncertain length. This series of glyphs is likely to have recorded the name or names of the sculptor or sculptors (Houston 2016a).

Text 1

Beginning the text, at positions A1–B1, is the date 13 Ajaw 13 Kumk'u, a calendrical position within a 52-year cycle of the Maya (Table 1). There are hints of numerology in the date, especially in the unusual use of 13 for both day and month signs, and in an event taking place just prior to the five days linked to rites of reversal and renewal at the end (and beginning) of the next year. This event appears to be a **YAX-TUUN** (“first stone”) ceremony, involving the initial emplacement of a monument after royal accession. Such rituals are also documented at Piedras Negras (on Stela 6 at position A18) and at Tonina, Mexico (on Monument 169 in position B4). Yet the absence of a Maya Long Count on the panel presents an interpretive challenge, in that such a longer tabulation would allow us to establish an absolute rather than a relative date. One possibility, given the style of the monument and the individuals named on it, is 9.14.12.6.0 in the Long Count, or Feb. 1, A.D. 724 in the Gregorian calendar. The more precise date in Text 2—a so-called “Period Ending” in epigraphic jargon—suggests an alternative of 9.17.5.1.0, or Jan. 19, A.D. 776.

Nonetheless, the most persuasive candidate may lie outside dynastic time and deeper into mytho-historical periods, an inference supported by events in the passages that follow. The overall structure of the narrative is opaque, with sections of text that are difficult to separate. Yet, it is evident that each of the statements of agency (**u-KAB-ji-ya**) has distinct mythic actions and participants. The first event refers to the emplacement of a stone, the second to “tying ropes” (**i-ka-cha-ja**, see also Aguateca Stela 1 at position A7, or Copan Temple 18, Northwest Jamb at position C3). One rope is said to be “yellow,” *k'an*, a possible allusion to the concept of “center”; the other two carry the label “green-blue,” *yax*, potentially signaling something “new” or “first” (for ritual ropes, see Stuart 2005, 28–29, 103). The third event may allude to multiple acts of construction, with a plural expression to buttress that nuance.

Supervising each event are different gods. The first set of deities, who helped to raise the stone, are the 4 Itzamtuun, a group of elderly, stony, atlantean figures (position B3; Martin 2015). Laboring hard in other images, these deities are mentioned in the panel as the “new-elevated-stone persons” (A4, **K'AL-YAX-TUUN-AJ**). The second god, who presides over the tying of ropes, is the “water serpent” [D3–D4; Stuart 2007]). He (or it) is an aquatic being of surging streams and rivers, possibly springs, conceptualized as luminous places described through poetic couplets (“shiny sky, shiny earth,” positions C2–D2).

The final events concern construction. Here, the supervisors are the *yax k'uh*, “new/first god(s)” (F1) and *yax ajaw*, “new/first lord(s)” (F2). Much like the couplets above, these epithets could pertain to the same being or beings. The esoteric content, laid out in three parts, leads to the presumption that, in the first part of the panel, some far-distant events play out in primordial time. Indeed, the first gods, the first lords, gods of stone, another of water, come together in ritual sequence. Presumably, the events transpired on the same day, about nine years before the inception of the current era in the Maya Calendar. Nor is the reference unique: triadic events at this time of beginnings also appear on mythogonic monuments such as Quirigua Stela C (Looper 2003, 11, 158–160). The panel may thus provide one of the richest accounts

yet recovered of Maya thoughts about origins and the gods who supervised them.

The text then moves into a section of events that can be more securely placed in time and, indeed, pertain to mortuary rituals performed by and relating to historical figures:

F2-E3	5 Lamat 16 K'ank'in	Nov. 11, A.D. 740	"Fire entering" tomb Death expression Half-[Ha'b] period
G6-G7	10 Lamat 11 Xul	May 30, A.D. 741	
G11-G12	3 Ajaw 3 Mol	July 1, A.D. 741	

Text 2

Text 2 continues with a series of historical events relating to a Sak Tz'i' lord:

H1-I1	9 Ok 13 Pohp	Feb. 26, A.D. 721	Birth of K'ab Kante'
H4-I4	(3 Ak'bal) 16 Mak	Oct. 15, A.D. 771	Accession?
K1-J2	6 Ajaw (13 K'ayab)	Dec. 30, A.D. 775	Period Ending

Text 3

With Text 3 there is a floating date, associated with an event of uncertain reading, perhaps **JUB?-yi**. It refers, at least in its visual components, to deluges and violent dynastic conflict:

P1-Q1 (9.13.11.4.14)	6 lx 7 Sotz'	Apr. 26, A.D. 703
or		
P1-Q1 (9.16.3.17.14)	6 lx 7 Sotz'	Apr. 13, A.D. 755.

A "deluge" event with the Ix date is probably not by chance, as a similar association occurs on Altar de Sacrificios Sculpted Panel 4: pC5 (Graham 1972: fig. 59; Houston 2016b).

The image, dominated by the texts around it, displays a human impersonator of a storming Chahk with *manopla* or bludgeon (Taube and Zender 2009); indeed, he is a version of Chahk known in the inscriptions as Yopaat, a testy figure who may correspond to especially violent tropical storms. His boisterous presence is conceivably associated in some way with the "deluge" event of 6 Ix 7 Sotz'. Regrettably, the carvers once again failed to oblige with any firm tether to absolute time, and the setting could also have been further back in time than the 8th century date hypothesized above. There is room for another individual to the lower left and shapes emerging from the broken edge hint at locks of hair or bodily decoration from that missing figure. The glyph order, as notated on the drawing, "crosses" the body at its head or chest, then moves back across at the knees.

The puzzle is what to make of these events and their relation to the historical personages highlighted in the text. The name K'ab Kante' is documented elsewhere, on panels in Brussels and Denver, as well as on a late, relatively small stela in a private collection (see above; Bíró 2004; Miller and Martin 2004: fig. 51). Since the lord named on the Denver and Brussels monuments lived decades earlier than the one depicted on Panel 1, these cannot be the same figure. Rather, K'ab Kante' appears to be a name used repeatedly by the royal family of Sak Tz'i', a convention seen in the dynastic sequences of other Maya kingdoms, including nearby Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan. Curiously, the new panel makes it clear that K'ab Kante' also claimed control over Ak'e' and the "Bat"-place, as shown in turn by a panel in a collection in New York (and formerly in Caracas, Venezuela), as well as the so-called "Stendahl/Zurich" panel, and with dates divergent from the panel discovered in situ. The Stendahl monument was dedicated on 9.14.15.0.0 (Sept. 18, A.D. 726) and the Caracas panel on 9.16.3.10.11 (Nov. 21, A.D. 754), albeit with a retroactive reference to a K'ab Kante' on

9.13.15.0.0 (Jan. 1, A.D. 707). The fluidity of Emblem titles fits with the manifold negotiations, mergers, and ruptures that characterized the history of Sak Tz'i'.

Three polities are mentioned on the panel: Sak Tz'i', Ak'e', and the so-called "Bat" emblem that is often tethered to Ak'e'. There is little doubt that most events on the panel are being supervised or orchestrated by **K'AB-KAN-TE'** (K'ab Kante'), the ruler of Sak Tz'i'. Three other historical personages are named:

- (1) **Ix sa-wi** (E5), a woman whose burial or tomb-fire event occurred in A.D. 740.
- (2) **KAN-?9** (Kan Bolon, F6), a Sak Tz'i' Ajaw, who may have been the spouse of the interred woman
- (3) Their probable son, **la?-?-EK'** (Witz'? Ek', G3). the *ch'ok bakab*, "youthful *bakab*," who attended the interment of the female.

Then, in a separate temporal frame:

- (4) K'ab Kante', born A.D. 721, perhaps acceded (or died?) A.D. 771.
- (5) Kan Ek', Sak Tz'i' Ajaw, active in A.D. 775. This could be same captive or subordinate, also a Sak Tz'i' lord, mentioned on Yaxchilan Stela 10. That monument comes from the time of Bird Jaguar IV of Yaxchilan, with a dedicatory date of about 9.16.15.0.0, Feb. 20, A.D. 766.
- (6) K'ab Kante'?, in the "Storm/Venus" event, from Lacanha/Bonampak.

Preliminary Reading of Text

- A1 13 Ajaw
 B1 13 Kumk'u
 A2 **K'AL-wa-ni** "dedication"
 B2 **TUUN-ni-IL** "stone of deceased person or god?"
 A3 **u-KAB-ji-ya** "his doing, supervising"
 B3 **4-ITZAM[TUUN]** "atlantean gods"
 A4 **YAX-K'AL-TUUN-AJ** "raised first-stone person?"
 B4 **OCH-bi-ja** "enters road" (possible reference to death)
 A5 **20?-PAT-mu-ti**
 B5 **20-XIB-?-?-?** ... in couplet with A5
 A6 **'i-ka-cha-ja**, "now it is bound"
 B6 **?-K'AN-na-"Rope"**
 C1 **chi-cho-?-YAX-?CHAJAN**
 D1 **?-la[ja]-?YAX?-?CHAJAN**
 C2 **?-?-KAAN-na?**
 D2 **?-KAB** ... a couplet, "shiny sky-earth"
 C3 **u-KAB[ji]-ya** "his doing, supervising"
 D3 **?-YAX-CHIT** "a water serpent title"
 C4 **1-WITZ'** "1 water serpent"
 D4 **NAAH?-CHAAN/KAAN**, also related to water-serpents
 C5 **?-o-ba**, pluralizer
 D5 **PAT-?-?-ni**
 C6 **YAX-K'AL-TUUN**
 D6 **YAX?-ta?-ji?**
 E1 **u-KAB-ji-ya** "his doing, supervising"
 F1 **YAX-K'UH**
 E2 **YAX-AJAW-wa**
 F2 5 Lamat
 E3 11 K'ank'in
 F3 **OCH-K'AHK'** "fire-enters"
 E4 **tu-MUK-IL** (in his tomb)

F4 **K'INICH-K'AB-KAN-TE'** (Name of Sak Tz'i' lord)
 E5 **IX-sa-wi** (compare with Yaxchilan Lintel 23:N7)
 F5 **IX-AJ-pa-chi**
 E6 **u-KAB-ji-ya** "his doing, supervising"
 F6 **KAN-BOLON** "name of Sak Tz'i' lord"
 G1 **SAK-TZ'I'-AJAW** (Sak Tz'i' emblem glyph)
 G2 **yi-ta-ji** "with"
 G3 **la?-?-EK'** (Name of a high-ranking youth, son of woman in tomb and Sak Tz'i' lord?)
 G4 **ch'o-ko-ba-ka-ba** (Youthful, lordly title)
 G5 **MIL [zero]-10-'winal'-ji-ya**
 G6 **'i-u-ti** 10 Lamat
 G7 11 Xul (Chikin?)
 G8 **K'A'-yi u-? SAK-IK'-IL** (death expression)
 G9 **u-KAAN-nu-?9-IL**
 G10 12-"Twenty" (winik?)
 G11 3 Ajaw 3 Mol
 G12 **TAHN-na LAM** (half-period)
 G13 **ma-IL-ji** - "does not see, is dead"
 G14 **'i-CHAM?-mi** "now dies" (but probably referring back to the death just mentioned)
 H1 9 Ok
 I1 1 Pohp
 H2 **SIH-ya K'AB-KAN-TE'** "from birth"
 I2 **13 [K'IN] - 6 WINIK-ji-ya**
 H3 **11 HA'B-ya**
 I3 **2 WINIK-HA'B-ya**
 H4 day sign (3 Ak'bal?)
 I4 *16 **ma-ka**
 ... possibly another 9 to 10 rows in missing block
 J1 **a-na?-ka?-IL**
 K1 6 Ajaw
 J2 **NAAH?-1-TUUN-ni** (first 5 tuun, thus has to be a Period Ending date of X.X.5.0.0)
 K2 **??**
 L1 **u?-?-?**
 M1 **tzi-la?-?**
 N1 **K'AB-KAAN-TE'**
 O1 **u-KAB-ji-ya**
 N2 **KAAN-na-EK'**
 O2 **SAK-TZ'I'-AJAW**
 ... floating glyphs, in Text 3
 P1 6 Ix?
 Q1 7 Sotz?
 Q2 "deluge"
 R1 7-?- "9"
 S1 **pa?-?-?**
 S2 **K'AWIIL**
 T1 **??-?-?**
 U1 **u-KAB-ji-ya** "his doing/supervising"
 U2 **K'AB-KAN-TE'** (name of Sak Tz'i' lord)
 U3 **SAK-TZ'I'-TE'-AJAW-wa?** (Sak Tz'i' emblem glyph, or possibly the "Bat" emblem)
 V1 **K'UHUL-'a[k'e]-AJAW** (Ak'e emblem glyph)
 V2 **ba-ka-ba** (lordly title)
 W1 **'i-tz'a-ti** (sculptor's name)

In sum, the text appears to begin by invoking gods and mythogenic events in far distant times. That date cannot be securely attached to the Long Count, and therefore to the Gregorian Christian Calendar, but its mythic nature seems likely. The overall thrust of the second part of the text, which is less disconnected, points strongly to the kingdom of Sak Tz'i' and its dynasts — a wife, a ruler, and perhaps

their son. The text then moves to a second temporal frame, a generation later, perhaps with another father-son combination. Then, in the third frame, there is K'ab Kante', and, possibly, his father, Kan Ek'. A key, enigmatic element is the emblem at U3. It is unclear whether another Sak Tz'i', which in other texts does not possess the additional "night" marking (identified in a personal communication by Marc Zender), was now linked to the Ak'e kingdom as well. Aside from glyphic details, which will continue to intrigue and puzzle scholars, the chances are probable that the panel confirms that its findspot was the main seat of the Sak Tz'i' dynasty.

Discussion

The scale of settlement and architecture in the epicenter of Lacanjá Tzeltal testifies to the political importance of the site during the Classic period. Although no complete map exists for any of the previously known capital centers of the Lacanjá River valley, the site is comparable to, and likely more expansive than, Bonampak, Lacanha, and Plan de Ayutla. The preliminary nature of our map and the distinct topography shaping the layout of all ancient cities make it difficult to offer detailed comparisons with other sites in the region. Nonetheless, to offer a generous estimate, Lacanjá Tzeltal's architectural core and associated settlement occupy an area of roughly 25 ha (Figure 8). Maps published by Martos López (2005, 2009) show an architectural core for Plan de Ayutla covering 16 ha, while published maps of Bonampak (e.g., Tovalín Ahumada and Ortiz Villarreal 2006; Paillés 1987) display a site measuring approximately 21 ha. In contrast, secondary political centers in the region are at least smaller by half, with sites like Tecolote covering 9 ha (Scherer and Golden 2009), or Budsilhá a mere 4 ha. The well-mapped areas of Piedras Negras, on the other hand, cover approximately 70 ha, and this number under-represents the extent of settlement associated with the core, which extends continuously to surrounding hills and valleys (Nelson 2005). Although the monumental core of Yaxchilan has been mapped over an area of roughly 36 ha, with surrounding settlement it was likely closer in scale to Piedras Negras. Palenque is the largest of all with the current map of the site core covering 220 ha (Barnhart 2001).

Merely measuring the extent of the architecture, however, tells only part of the story. Scale and density speak to the labor invested, and potentially the size of populace involved in construction efforts. At present, we cannot hazard a population estimate for Lacanjá Tzeltal, nor does counting surface-visible buildings reveal much about construction effort. Buried architecture, with buildings layered one upon the other, is typical for Maya sites and obscures older construction efforts. This makes the latest construction episodes far less labor-intensive than they might otherwise seem. Despite these caveats, such data provide an additional proxy for comparing site size, which has implications for reconstructing broader socio-political processes.

A preliminary count of structures at Lacanjá Tzeltal yields 120 structures in 25 ha (.25 km²), or a density of 4.8 structures per hectare. Sak Tz'i'-Lacanjá Tzeltal's best mapped neighbors, Palenque and Piedras Negras, are far larger, as noted above. Nevertheless, it is possible to devise a crude comparative measure of density. Palenque ranks among the most densely constructed cities of the Maya area, with 673 structures

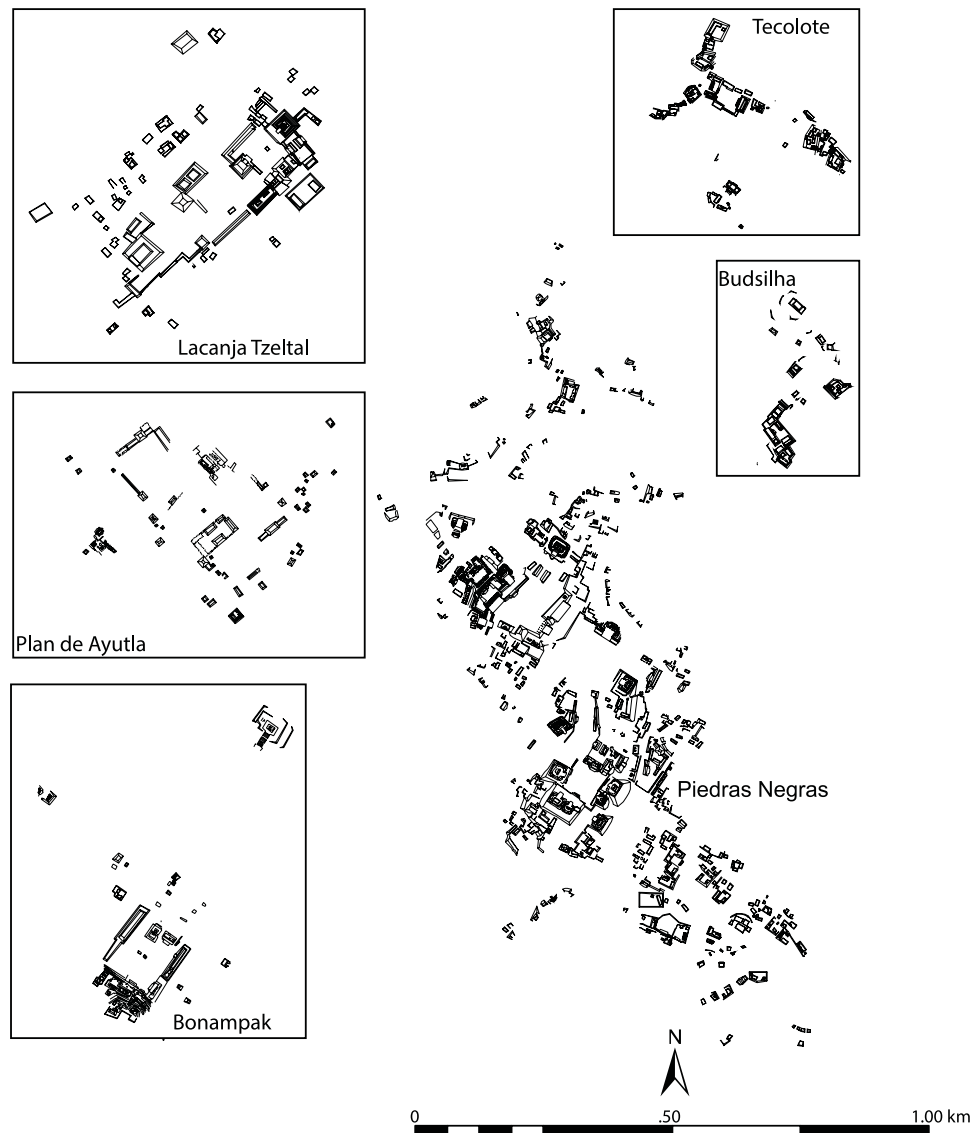


Figure 8. Comparative maps (to scale) of sites mentioned in text. All topographic data has been removed from the maps (Plan de Ayutla after Martos López 2009; Bonampak after Tovalín Ahumada and Ortiz Villarreal 2006; Paillés 1987; Piedras Negras by Parris and Proskouriakoff with additions by Nelson and others after Nelson 2005).

per square kilometer or 6.73 per hectare in a mapped area of 2.2 km² (Barnhart 2001, 73). Piedras Negras has 517 structures per square kilometer (5.17 per hectare), in an area of .97 km² (Nelson 2005, 140). It is difficult to offer direct comparisons with Plan de Ayutla and Bonampak, but the maps of these sites have fewer than 100 individual structures in their 16 and 21 hectare cores respectively, suggesting densities of less than 6.25 and 4.8 structures per hectare. Thus, Sak Tz'i' - Lacanjá Tzeltal is comparable to Plan de Ayutla, Bonampak, and Piedras Negras in terms of architectural density. Its monumental core appears larger than that of Plan de Ayutla and Bonampak and yet is significantly smaller in size than Piedras Negras. If size of the polity core is any indication of political importance, these figures accord with the kingdom's presence in the inscriptions: the rulers and nobles of Sak Tz'i' were important political actors in the Usumacinta River region, and yet they did not achieve the influence or power of the great courts such as Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan, or Palenque.

Nonetheless, the apparent continuity of occupation at Lacanjá Tzeltal throughout the Classic period further links the site to material patterns associated with other capitals in the Western Lowlands. Architectural remains and ceramic

dates obtained from our preliminary excavations in 2018 and 2019 indicate that occupation at Sak Tz'i' - Lacanjá Tzeltal began during the Middle Preclassic, perhaps as early as 750 B.C., although radiocarbon analyses are required to provide a more certain data. The presence of ceramics provisionally dated, on the basis of rim form and surface treatment, to the Late to Terminal Classic periods (c. A.D. 800–900) excavated from the patios surrounding the D6-15 palace suggests that occupation continued into the 9th or early 10th centuries A.D. Evidence of Early Classic (A.D. 350–600) occupation is thus far limited, but present in excavations from the ballcourt, at least. Such continuity, particularly with evidence of occupation through the Early Classic period, is a phenomenon observed at other polity capitals (Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan) but not at smaller villages in the Usumacinta River region (e.g., Golden and Scherer 2013; Liendo Stuardo 2005, 2007; López Bravo 2001/2002).

The presence of abundant monuments on the site and the evidence of significant looting suggest that a substantial number of carvings in public and private collections came from Lacanjá Tzeltal. The task of “re-provenancing” those sculptures is now feasible, with the necessity of measuring known monuments in those collections against the

dimensions of carcasses still on site. Most directly, the legible text of Panel 1 confirms a close and unambiguous association between the architectural remains of Lacanjá Tzeltal and the Classic period kingdom known as Sak Tz'i'. As discussed above, it has previously been suggested that the nearby site of Plan de Ayutla was the dynastic seat of the Sak Tz'i' kingdom (Bíró 2004; Martos López 2009). We reiterate this remains a viable claim: Lacanjá Tzeltal and Plan de Ayutla might have served as dual capitals, or alternatively as successive capitals, over the course of dynastic turmoil during the Classic period. The movement of dynastic seats during the Classic period, along with the fissioning of dynasties with the establishment of new capitals, is now well-documented most famously for the Kaan kingdom (Dzibanche and Calakmul) and the Mut kingdom (Tikal, Dos Pilas/Aguateca), as well as smaller dynasties in the realm of Hix Witz (Fitzsimmons 2006; Houston 1993; Helmke and Awe 2016; Martin 2005; Martin and Velásquez García 2016; Stuart 2003). Alternatively, Plan de Ayutla may be the seat of the poorly understood polity of Ak'e (Beliaev and Safronov 2009).

In considering the scope and scale of Lacanjá Tzeltal as a political center, the count of monuments at Lacanjá Tzeltal complements the rough measure of settlement size and density. The 56 carved monuments are comparable to the roughly 60 sculptures reported for Piedras Negras but fall short of the nearly 100 monuments known for Yaxchilan, both kingdoms governed by *k'uhul ajaw* (Graham 1979, 1982; Graham and Von Euw 1977; Maler 1901, 1903; Morley 1937-1938). On the other hand, the tally at Lacanjá Tzeltal is significantly more than the monument count for other known *ajaw*-governed sites from the region, including Bonampak ($n \approx 11$) and La Mar ($n = 3$) (Bíró 2007; Mathews 1980; Zender 2002). Rulers at locales in the region bear the *sajal* title, a rank clearly subordinate to *ajaw*. Known monument tallies at such sites are even lower, as evidenced by El Cayo ($n \approx 8$) and La Pasadita ($n \approx 4$).

The preliminary results emerging from our work at Sak Tz'i'-Lacanjá Tzeltal highlight the complexity and variability inherent in Maya political organization, especially as manifest in the kingdoms of the Usumacinta River region. If we relied on royal titles alone—*k'uhul ajaw*, *ajaw*, and *sajal*—we could envision three tiers of political authority. And yet the actual historical data that emerges from careful analysis of monuments from the Usumacinta River region highlights a far more complex political situation, one that resonates with the archaeological record at Lacanjá Tzeltal. The site was clearly the seat of a dynasty with greater influence than other governing lords bearing the *ajaw* title (e.g., at Bonampak, La Mar). The evidence is in the number of sculptures produced at court, the human power that was marshalled to build its multiple pyramids and other ceremonial structures, and the size of the population that surrounded the court and entered its multiple large plazas for celebrations. And yet Sak Tz'i'-Lacanjá Tzeltal never achieved the scale of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan, neighboring kingdoms governed by *k'uhul ajaw*. Nevertheless, Sak Tz'i' was a formidable enemy and an important ally to those greater kingdoms, as evidenced by the frequency by which it appears in texts at those sites. The question of what allows some kingdoms to grow large—in size, power, and influence—and others to remain small remains central to our research.

Conclusions and Future Work

Our research to date has benefitted from, and is indeed dependent on, local collaborations without which we would not have documented the site of Sak Tz'i' - Lacanjá Tzeltal. Beyond simply permissions providing access to the site, we gain important cultural, political, linguistic, and environmental insights from our local interlocutors that shape many of our interpretations. In one fascinating exchange concerning the name of the ruler K'ab Kante' from Panel 1, Golden and Scherer learned that a similar epithet is still used by Tzeltal speakers to describe a particularly strong or powerful person. In the modern instance, it derives its meaning from associations with the branch (*k'ab*) of the *kante'* or *k'ante'* tree (*Diphyssa robinoides*) valued for its durability (Guirola 2010, 12; Polian 2015, 343). We do not suggest that the epithet carried the same significance in the Classic period. What is most critical about this exchange of ideas is that the community members find these discoveries meaningful in local terms.

We anticipate that ongoing research at Lacanjá Tzeltal will open up a new dimension to the study of politics, economy, ritual, and warfare in the Maya west. By securely tying the dynasty of Sak Tz'i' to a location on the landscape, textual references to the kingdom's rulers come into clearer focus. Further research will make it possible to refine models of interpolity interactions, and resolve outstanding questions of political development among the smaller kingdoms pressed on all sides by regional powers like Tonina, Piedras Negras, and Yaxchilan. We will continue this research through a multi-year, multi-institutional research effort that will focus not only on the life of the court at the dynastic center of Sak Tz'i' - Lacanjá Tzeltal, but also on the experience of communities in the surrounding hinterlands.

As observed in the introduction to this paper, the dynamic and varied nature of Maya rulership resonates with similar political institutions found the world over. Research at Lacanjá Tzeltal, with its deep temporal record, affords a unique opportunity to examine how a Maya kingdom survived, and apparently sometimes thrived, despite never achieving the level of influence and power exercised by some of its rivals. Throughout its history, Sak Tz'i' was surrounded by dominant powers and jostled with its neighbors for local hegemony in the face of alternating periods of détente, defense, and attack. Thus, a primary question motivates our research: how did ruler and commoner navigate the shifting socio-political landscape of the western Maya area during the Classic period? Critical to answering this question is continuing our long-running research on western Maya warfare through the study of Sak Tz'i's defensive systems, including the walls and chasms that demarcate part of the site center (Scherer and Golden 2009, 2014; Scherer et al. 2019). Yet, the scope of our work has expanded to better understand the economy of the marketplace as well as the production, distribution, and consumption of food, that would have been impacted by warfare and were critical for the long-term survival or failure of the Sak Tz'i' polity. Beyond the site core, this work involves the study of local agricultural features, particularly terraces, coupled with paleoethnobotanical, human osteological, and zooarchaeological studies. In so doing we will continue to work to advance knowledge of the ancient Maya and ensure that local stakeholders, too, find benefit in working with us to study and

protect this small but important part of Mexico's indigenous heritage.

Geolocation Information

The sites discussed in this article are in the Usumacinta River region of Chiapas, Mexico and Petén, Guatemala. A good general georeference point for readership is: 17° 2'0.00"N, 91°19'60.00"W

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