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A Note on the carved bone from Copán Temple 11

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The "Blood of Kings" exhibition included a carved deer tibia, found in association with Temple 11 at Copan (Schele and Miller 1986:152, plate 50a). Although the date given by Schele and Miller for the bone is A.D. 750-800, I shall suggest a reassignment of its date to no earlier than 09.18.12.05.17 (802 CE) and likely circa 09.19.10.00.00 (820 CE). In addition, the bone may depict an event that took place in association with Temple 21a.

As pointed out by Schele, the bone is carved with a scene of the sixteenth ruler of Copan, Yax Pasaj Chan Yoat, and a "female companion" standing on a skyband (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Carved deer tibia from Copán Temple 11 (drawing by Linda Schele).

The band is bent into a stepped form, with a large Venus sign placed beneath the figure of Yax Pasaj. The inscription contains no readable verb to describe the event, merely recording the name and titles of Yax Pasaj (following a partially illegible glyph). One of these titles is a "numbered k'atun" title. Linda Schele (1989) proposed that the k'atun titles of Yax Pasaj record k'atuns of reign, rather than life. According to the patterns of his titles in other texts, prior to 09.17.12.05.17, he was a one k'atun lord, prior to 09.18.12.05.17, a two k'atun lord, and after 09.18.12.05.17, a three k'atun ajaw. The three k'atun title attributed to the king on this bone, then, indicates that the piece must date to after 09.18.12.05.17.

This late date is also suggested by the portrait style of Yax Pasaj, which is very close to that of Stela 11, as noted by Longyear (1952:111). Stela 11, dated to 09.19.10.00.00, depicts the king with an elongated head, beard, and torch-pierced forehead similar to the bone. In fact, if the torch-pierced forehead is an indication of a posthumous state, as on the Palenque sarcophagus lid (Schele 1976:17), the bone may have been a posthumous portrait of Yax Pasaj, dating to around 09.19.10.00.00.

The late date of this bone is consistent with its archaeological context. The bone was found in a deep shaft in the floor of Temple 11. At the bottom of this shaft, sealed by a plaster cap, was a cache consisting of shell and jade. This apparently was the cache for the final phase of Temple 11, which was dedicated on 09.17.02.12.16 01 Kib' 19 Keh (26 Sept. 773), according to textual sources. The carved deer bone was found above the cache, in association with a deposit of pottery,

stone, shells, and human teeth and bones. According to Longyear (1952:19), the pottery of this upper deposit is Postclassic, and had "accumulated in the shaft after the priests had abandoned the temple." The bone's association, therefore, allows for its late date, established through style and epigraphy.

Although the text gives no indication of the nature of the event depicted on the bone, there may be an iconographic clue to its significance. The conformation of the skyband suggests that it may have been a step or bench. Interestingly, Temple 21a, the temple adjacent to the famous Temple 22, is fitted with a step that bears Venus imagery so prominent that Morley (1920:319) nicknamed the structure the "Temple of Venus." The step is located in the temple interior, at the threshold between the lower outer chamber and a raised inner chamber. Three large Venus signs are arranged so as to divide a text of sixteen blocks into four segments. As analyzed in a recent note by Schele (1995), the text begins with a reference to the "succession" of Yax Pasaj and his seating as ajaw on the date 09.16.12.05.17 06 Kab'an 10 Mol (02 July 763). Then, following a reference to the patron gods of Copan, the text predicts the completion of the 17th k'atun. In Schele's view, the future context of the final event indicates that the temple should be associated with the accession date of Yax Pasaj, rather than with the 09.17.00.00.00 period ending. Given the prominence of the Venus imagery of Temple 21a, it is possible that the tibia represents an event that took place on the bench of this building. Of course, if this is a posthumous portrait, then event would not have been the accession itself, but perhaps an anniversary of the accession presented in a supernatural context.

A possible relationship to accession is suggested not only by the significance of the building, but also by the appearance of the woman in front of Yax Pasaj. Her presence recalls the prominent women in the accession scenes on the "niche stela" of Piedras Negras. If the bone scene is structurally equivalent to the Piedras Negras accession scenes, then the woman depicted on the bone may be the mother of Yax Pasaj, the lady from Palenque who was important enough to be mentioned on Copan Stela 8.

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