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The Long Mexican Supremacy: A New Look at the Relations of Teotihuacan with Tikal, Piedras Negras, and the Snake Kingdom in the Second Half of the 5th and Early 6th Centuries

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In this article, we address the problem that remains one of the most interesting and complicated in the study of the history of Early Classic Mesoamerican civilizations. The controversy regarding the nature of the influence of the powerful Mexican city-empire of Teotihuacan on the Maya lowlands has not subsided for decades and has long led to a polarization of views among researchers (Braswell 2003; Canuto, Auld-Thomas, and Arredondo Leiva 2020; Proskouriakoff 1993:4–10; Schele and Freidel 1990:146–147; Stone 1989; Stuart 2000:467–490; Stuart 2024). Recent archaeological discoveries have confirmed that connections between the two parts of Mesoamerica were bilateral and complex (see Houston et al. 2021; Sugiyama et al. 2020). They had been established long before 378 and took different forms over several centuries (Canuto, Auld-Thomas, and Arredondo Leiva 2020:376–384). However, there is a lack of comprehensive study on various aspects and phases of these relations. Scholars have mostly been focused on the arrival of Sihyaj K'ahk's army in Peten in 378 or the journey of the first Copan king, K'inich Yax K'uk'



Mo', to Central Mexico. In this article, however, we explore other important questions: how long did the political domination of foreigners last? And what were the consequences of its end?

The evidence presented in the article illustrates that Teotihuacan's supremacy over Tikal and other Maya cities was much longer and deeper than traditionally believed (see also Bíró 2017:48–49; Martin 2020:80–81). Structurally, the work is divided into several parts. In the first section, "Tikal and Teotihuacan after 468: Enemies or Allies?", we will argue that the idea of a confrontation between Tikal and Teotihuacan in the second half of the 5th century that is pervasive in the literature lacks reliable grounds. Inscriptions from this period from various Peten sites (Tikal Stela 40, El Peru Stela 16, and Uaxactun Stela 22) strongly indicate that between 468 and 504, the region remained within Teotihuacan's sphere of influence. Another important piece of evidence of Tikal's friendly political and cultural contacts with Central Mexico at the time is the murals of Tetitla at Teotihuacan itself.

The strongest evidence of Teotihuacan's active participation in Classic Maya political life in the early 6th century comes from the Usumacinta region. The analysis of the inscriptions of Yaxchilan Lintel 37 and monuments from Piedras Negras and Tonina confirms that Tikal kings remained vassals or allies of the Mexican empire until at least 508. The section entitled "Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras in the Politics of Hegemons" is devoted to this topic.

Finally, in the concluding part of the article entitled "The New Era", we analyze how the concept of a long Teotihuacan dominance affects the current understanding of the pivotal events that determined the course of Classic Maya history in the middle of the 6th century, namely the weakening of Tikal and the rise of the Snake (Kanul) kings.¹ Some circumstantial evidence suggests that during the era of Teotihuacan supremacy, Tikal and Dzibanche were allies and represented the interests of the Mexican metropolis in their respective regions. However, in the middle of the 6th century, Teotihuacan faced significant internal difficulties and apparently could no longer control the distant periphery. This resulted in a vacuum of supreme power in the Maya lowlands. Both Mutul and Kanul rulers tried to occupy the vacant position of the hegemon. Our conclusion is based, among other things, on the occurrence of the titles *kaloomte'* and "western K'awiiil" in the inscriptions. The "western K'awiiil" title might have emphasized the role of Tikal rulers as Teotihuacan representatives in the Maya area. On the other hand, the title *kaloomte'* was considered the most prestigious in the Maya political hierarchy and, between 378 and 518, belonged exclusively to Mexican foreigners. Its almost simultaneous adoption by the rulers of Tikal and Dzibanche became a clear manifestation of both dynasties' claims to leadership. The competition between them led to a series of devastating wars.

Tikal and Teotihuacan after 468: Enemies or Allies?

The analysis of numerous hieroglyphic inscriptions gives a clear indication that Teotihuacan played a leading role in Maya political life from at least the end of the 4th century. Monuments and murals from Tikal, Uaxactun, El Peru, Naachtun, La Sufricaya and other sites describe the same pivotal event – the arrival of an army of strangers led by Sihyaj K'ahk' in Peten (Estrada-Belli et al. 2009; Martin 2003:11–15; Martin and Grube 2008:29–31; Nondédéo, Lacadena García-Gallo, and Cases Martin 2019; Safronov and

¹ For the reading of the emblem glyphs of Tikal and the Snake Kingdom as Mutul and Kanul see Helmke and Kupprat (2016:39–44) and Stuart (2023).



Beliaev 2017; Stuart 2000:467–490; Stuart 2024:9–21). The invaders deposed the previous ruler of Tikal and replaced him with their protégé, Yax Nuun Ahiin I, the son of the Mexican lord Jatz’oom Kuy (**Fig. 1**).² Over the following several decades, kings either originated from Teotihuacan or sanctioned by the Mexican metropolis came to power in numerous Maya cities. Jatz’oom Kuy and his successors presided over such subordinate lords and held the highest title in the Maya political hierarchy, “western *kaloomte*” (Estrada-Belli and Tokovinine 2016:159–161; Martin 2020:241–245).³

² For more details on the decipherment of the syllable **tz’o**, see Davletshin (2024:115–119); however, see also Stuart (2024:58-62) for remaining problems with the phonetic reading of the “Spearthrower Owl” name.

³ On the recently discovered El Peru Stela 51, Jatz’oom Kuy also bears the “Mutul lord” Tikal emblem glyph (block M5). This could mean the family ties between Teotihuacan’s emperor and the Tikal dynasty were much stronger than traditionally believed (Kelly, Freidel, and Navarro-Farr 2024:25, 33; Stuart 2024:13–14). In our opinion, another possible example of the use of the Tikal dynastic title by Mexican hegemony is recorded on the right side of Tikal Stela 31. Short captions on both lateral sides of this monument mention characters with foreign names who probably arrived in Peten from Central Mexico (Beliaev 2019; for full analysis and translation of inscriptions on Tikal Stela 31 lateral sides see Davletshin 2024:126-129). One of them was a military commander (*uyajawte’*) under the direction of a person of high status who held the titles of *kaloomte’* and “holy? Mutul lord” (blocks P2-P3). The name of the overlord is omitted in the text. We believe that he was the son of Jatz’oom Kuy, who took the Teotihuacan throne after his father’s death. Alternatively, it could be a posthumous mention of Jatz’oom Kuy himself. The son of Jatz’oom Kuy with Mexican name is referenced in the caption on the left side of Tikal Stela 31 (blocks K2-L4).



Fig. 1. Tikal Stela 4. Portrait of Yax Nuun Ahii I in Central Mexican attire. Photo by Yuriy Polyukhovych.



Although the decisive role of Teotihuacan in the transformation of the Classic Maya political regime is beyond any doubt today, many controversial issues remain unresolved. Little is known, for example, about how the invaders managed to maintain dominance over vassals for a long time. Teotihuacan was located far from the Maya area, preventing it from exerting direct control (see also Canuto, Auld-Thomas, and Arredondo Leiva 2020:394). Mechanisms of indirect control differed depending on the time and circumstances. In the first decades after the entrada, Sihyaj K'ahk' played the role of a reliable overseer and representative of Teotihuacan's interests in Peten. However, nothing is currently known of the heirs of this military leader. He has no traditional emblem glyph in the texts, which means he never founded a dynasty of his own. After the death of Sihyaj K'ahk', the rulers of Tikal, who were related to Jatz'oom Kuy and his descendants through family ties, likely became Teotihuacan's leading allies (Beliaev 2003; Martin 2003:15–17).

Long journeys to Central Mexico made by Maya kings became an important way to demonstrate loyalty to the new regime. There, the vassals of the “western *kaloomte*” received symbols of authority that legitimized their status as lawful rulers. We believe that this practice was initiated by the coronation of Yax Nuun Ahiin I, which, according to the text of Tikal Stela 31 (fig. 2), happened on September 14, 379⁴ at the place called Wiinte'naah (**UH-ti-ya wi-TE'-NAAH**, blocks F14-E15; on the reading Wiinte'naah, see Estrada-Belli and Tokovinine 2016:159-161). The toponym Wiinte'naah is one of the designations for Teotihuacan in Maya inscriptions. It is possible that Sihyaj K'ahk' bears the title *aj wiinte'naah* on the Tikal Marcador, which means he originated from this place (Beliaev, Galeev, and Vepretskii 2016:169). Yax Nuun Ahiin I was also there before moving to Tikal. It is mentioned on the carved bone MT35 from the burial of Mutul king Jasaw Chan K'awiil I (682-734) that on December 27, 378, Yax Nuun Ahiin I “descended from Wiinte'naah”. According to a common interpretation, this brief statement means that the Mexican prince departed from Wiinte'naah to Tikal (Martin 2020:407, n.18; Stuart 2000:508, n.9; Stuart 2024:36). If so, the coronation of Yax Nuun Ahiin I must have only taken place after his arrival in the Maya lowlands, although the place of the ceremony is clearly named Wiinte'naah on Tikal Stela 31.

Simon Martin, in his bid to resolve the obvious contradictions, suggested that in the case of Stela 31, Wiinte'naah was equated with a temple in Tikal which copied a similar prototype structure from Teotihuacan (Martin 2020:241-242), which seems unlikely to us. Some temples in Late Classic Copan do imitate Teotihuacan symbols, but by that time the great city's former glory was only a memory (Stuart 2000:495–498; Taube 2004). During the Early Classic, mentions of Wiinte'naah usually refer to actual Central Mexico. Moreover, the inscriptions give no reason to identify the “descent” of Yax Nuun Ahiin I with the beginning of his journey to Tikal. As the son of the Mexican emperor Jatz'oom Kuy, the young lord would have been born at Teotihuacan. On December 27, 378, he left his hometown but came back (“ascended to Wiinte'naah”) in September of the next year (see Tikal Stela 31, blocks E5-E7). It remains to be seen where and why Yax Nuun Ahiin I traveled.

We agree with Alexandre Tokovinine's notion that the “descent” of Yax Nuun Ahiin I from Wiinte'naah and his “ascent” were pre-coronation rites performed by the young prince (Fash, Tokovinine, and Fash 2009:217; Tokovinine 2020:264–265; see also Stuart 2024: 36). However, we disagree with his identification of Wiinte'naah as the Adosada platform of the Sun Pyramid in Teotihuacan. In our opinion, the best analogy to the actions of Yax Nuun Ahiin I are initiation ceremonies of Maya princes, which are

⁴ In this article, Maya calendar dates are converted to the Gregorian calendar according to the 584286 version of the GMT correlation proposed by Simon Martin and Joel Skidmore (Martin and Skidmore 2012).

well known from Late Classic inscriptions from Palenque and La Corona (Davletshin and Vepretskii 2017; Polyukhovych 2012:136; Stuart 2006:130). As shown by Albert Davletshin and Sergei Vepretskii, during their initiation ritual, the heirs to the throne went to a certain place where they remained in isolation for a long time. Therefore, the authors suggest referring to this action as the “ritual seclusion of princes” (Davletshin and Vepretskii 2023).



Fig. 2. Tikal Stela 31. Hieroglyphic text on the back of the monument. Photo by Yuriy Polyukhovych.



The text on the main tablet from the Temple of the Cross at Palenque reports that on June 18, 641, the local six-year-old prince Aj Pitzil Ohl (the future king of Palenque K'inich Kan Bahlam II) "ascended to an enclosed place surrounded by a wooden wall." The "ritual seclusion" of Aj Pitzil Ohl lasted 537 days, after which the prince "descended" on the day 9.10.10.0.0, 13 Ajaw 18 K'ank'in (December 7, 642). The duration of the initiation could vary but was usually tied to the calendar, namely important Long Count positions or 260-day tzolk'in cycles. In La Corona, the rite lasted 520 days, exactly two 260-day cycles (Davletshin and Vepretskii 2023:58-66).

In this context, it is important that 261 days passed between the "descent" of Yax Nuun Ahiin I and his coronation, which is roughly equal to one tzolk'in. Unfortunately, the date of his "ascent" is not exactly known due to lacunae and problems with the chronology of the text on Tikal Stela 31. In block E7 of this monument, the tzolk'in day-sign 8 Men is used, probably related to the "ascent" event. It is important that it is immediately followed by the date of the coronation of Yax Nuun Ahiin I in blocks F8-F9, which is recorded on Stela 31 with an obvious error in the tzolk'in day: 10 Kaban rather than 5 Kaban. It is logical to assume that the author of the text recorded the previous date with a similar coefficient error, that is, Yax Nuun Ahiin I finished his 259-day ritual seclusion and returned to Teotihuacan on day 3 Men, two days before the accession ceremony.⁵ If our reconstruction is correct, this is the earliest known example of the initiation of a Maya prince. The rite itself probably originated from Teotihuacan (see also Davletshin and Vepretskii 2023:67-68). Therefore, we believe that the accession of the new ruler of Tikal took place in Teotihuacan, and he was sent to the Maya lowlands somewhat later, when the situation in Peten had been stabilized.

The probable participation of Yax Nuun Ahiin I in the initiation rite forces us to re-examine the issue concerning the age of this ruler at the time of his coronation. Unfortunately, the exact date of his birth is unknown, but Yax Nuun Ahiin I bears the title "k'atun lord" on Tikal Stela 31 in connection with the period ending ceremony in 396 (blocks E16-E20). On this basis, the opinion that Jatz'oom Kuy's son was born no earlier than 376 and was no more than three years old at the time of his accession was firmly established in the literature (Grube and Martin 2000:118-119; Stuart 2024:34). Such an age seems too young for ritual seclusion. However, in our opinion, the meaning of k'atun-count titles in the Early Classic was somewhat different in comparison with later examples. On Tikal Stela 31, Yax Nuun Ahiin I is again named "k'atun lord" in the caption to the portrait on the left side of the monument (blocks I2-J3). This posthumous mention would have to consider the full length of life or reign of the Mutul king. Yax Nuun Ahiin I acceded in 379 and probably died in 404 (Tikal Stela 31, F20-E22). Thus, he ruled for twenty-five years, more than one twenty-year period. If the k'atun-count title on Stela 31 indicated the full age of this king, then Yax Nuun Ahiin I would have to bear the title "2-k'atun lord," but this is not the case. The same "error" could be seen in another Early Classic inscription, on El Zapote Stela 5. This monument was erected in 435 and it contains a mention of the son of Yax Nuun Ahiin I, Sihyaj Chan K'awiil II, who is similarly named "k'atun lord" (El Zapote Stela 5, D4-D5; see Beliaev, Vepretskii, and Galeev 2017:79–83, 201–202). Sihyaj Chan K'awiil II was crowned in 411, which means he had reigned for more than twenty-four years when El Zapote Stela 5 was dedicated. These examples allow us to conclude that the title "k'atun lord" did not mean that the king was less than twenty years old in the 5th century. Interestingly, in other early texts (El Peru Stela 9, pA2; Tikal Stela 2, pA7), the title "k'atun lord" is also written without any numeral

⁵ A possible scribal error in the date on Tikal Stela 31, E7 was previously noted by Sergei Vepretskii.



coefficients. Its use may have meant that the ruler had reached the age of twenty years and had become an adult. If so, Yax Nuun Ahiin I may have been older than traditionally believed. However, we agree that he had to be a young boy at the time of the entrada events, as evidenced by the late death of his father Jatz'oom Kuy in 439. We posit that Yax Nuun Ahiin I may have been about six or seven years old in 378-379, which is the usual age of initiation for Maya princes.⁶

Yax Nuun Ahiin I's accession at Teotihuacan set a precedent that other Maya kings sought to emulate. About half a century later, on September 7, 426, the founder of the Copan dynasty, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', "takes K'awiil" at Wiinte'naah (Schele 1992; Stuart 2004:227–240; Stuart 2005:383–384). The rite of taking a scepter with the image of the lightning god K'awiil was traditionally one of the stages of the complex enthronement ceremony of Maya rulers (Martin 2020:110-111). K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' originated from Caracol, but he did not return to his homeland after being legitimized in Teotihuacan (Stuart 2007a). Instead, he settled in Copan, where he began to rule. The story of K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' is very similar to Sihyaj K'ahk's arrival to Peten in 378. Tikal probably played an important role in his relocation to the southeastern periphery of the Maya lowlands. The rulers of Caracol at the time were vassals and probably relatives of Mutul kings (Looper and Polyukhovych 2016:4–5). Thus, having contributed to the establishment of their ally in Copan, Tikal significantly expanded the boundaries of their influence.

There is no consensus among scholars as to how long Tikal remained in Teotihuacan's orbit. A popular view is that the domination of foreigners was relatively short and lasted for some sixty years (Bíró 2011:81; Stuart 2024:121). Such conclusions are based on the gradual reduction of signs of direct Mexican presence in Tikal. In the first decades after the entrada, the invaders acted aggressively, as is characteristic of occupying regimes. Attempts were made to destroy the memory of the past, and ancient monuments were broken or moved to the outskirts (Martin 2000:57–59). On Tikal Stela 4, Yax Nuun Ahiin I is depicted as a typical foreigner dressed in Mexican attire (**Fig. 1**). However, during the reign of the next king, Sihyaj Chan K'awiil II (411-456), a course for the reconciliation of the two traditions was set. Tikal Stela 31, dated 445, is considered the best embodiment of the new policy. It is a monument where the local king is shown both as a descendant of Jatz'oom Kuy and a legitimate heir of the old dynasty that ruled in Mutul before the arrival of Sihyaj K'ahk' (Martin and Grube 2008:34-35) (**Fig. 2, 3**).

⁶ Our conclusion contradicts the results of the osteological analysis of the skeletal remains of the young individuals buried in Tikal Burial 10, the supposed tomb of Yax Nuun Ahiin I. Study of the teeth, which were hypothesized to belong to the adult owner of the tomb, has shown that he was born in Peten rather than Central Mexico (Wright 2005:97–98). However, as we have already mentioned, bodies of other individuals besides the king were found in Burial 10. Unfortunately, shortly after the discovery of the tomb their skeletal remains had been mixed up and even partially discarded in the field (Wright 2005:93-95). Because of this, today it is impossible to say with certainty that the teeth studied really belonged to Yax Nuun Ahiin I.



Fig. 3. Tikal Stela 31. Portrait of Sihyaj Chan K'awiil II on the front of the monument. Photo by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

Under the reigns of Sihyaj Chan K'awiil II and his son and successor K'an Kitam (458-485), Tikal flourished. It is evidenced by the active construction of new temples and the creation of monumental sculptures—

each a masterpiece in its own right—such as Stelae 31 and 40 (Guenter 2002:26–27; Martin and Grube 2008:35–37). The political influence of the Mutul rulers, strengthened by dynastic marriages, extended to most of central and eastern Peten, as well as other regions. K'an Kitam's wife originated from Naranjo (Tokovinine and Fialko 2007:10–13). Other influential allies or vassals of Tikal were Caracol, Xultun, Ucanal, and possibly Naachtun (Nondédéo, Lacadena García-Gallo, and Garay 2018:334–340). The growing power of Mutul rulers naturally led to their achieving greater political independence and affected relations with Teotihuacan. The reduction of foreign influence is visible in the remains of material culture, the iconography of stelae, and the content of inscriptions. For example, although the tomb of Sihyaj Chan K'awiil II, now known as Burial 48, shares many features with that of his father Yax Nuun Ahiin I, it contains far fewer Mexican-style objects (Martin and Grube 2008:35). This trend continued and intensified under K'an Kitam. On Tikal Stela 40, dedicated in 468, he still wears the Mexican mosaic headdress, but on the later Stela 9, he is shown as a typical Maya ruler (compare **Fig. 4, 5**). Likewise, the hieroglyphic texts created by the Early Classic successors of Sihyaj Chan K'awiil II contain no direct references to Teotihuacan or the subordinate status of Mutul kings.



Fig. 4. Tikal Stela 40. Portrait of K'an Kitam in Central Mexican headdress. Photo by Yuriy Polyukhovych.



Fig. 5. Tikal Stela 9. Portrait of K'an Kitam as typical Maya lord. Photo by Yuriy Polyukhovych.



How does one interpret these obvious changes? A common point of view in relevant literature is that Tikal gained independence from Teotihuacan in the second half of the 5th century. Stanley Guenter even suggested that K'an Kitam became an enemy of the Mexican empire around 470 and tried to link these changes to internal struggles in Teotihuacan itself (Guenter 2002:24-26). Dmitri Beliaev also mentions a "final break" of Tikal with Teotihuacan and dates this event to the reign of K'an Kitam or his son and successor Chak Tok Ich'aak III (485-508) in several studies (Beliaev 2003; Beliaev 2019). Such conclusions seem too far-reaching to us. Firstly, when we evaluate evidence for a connection with Teotihuacan in Maya monumental art, it is wrong to consider Tikal in isolation from other Peten cities. For example, El Peru Stela 16, decorated with an image of a warrior dressed in Mexican fashion (possibly a posthumous portrait of Sihyaj K'ahk' himself), is known to have been dedicated in 465 or 470 (Freidel and Escobedo 2006:805; Freidel, Escobedo, and Guenter 2007:197–203; Guenter 2014:151–154; Stuart 2024:28–29). The rulers of Uaxactun preserved the memory of the strangers even longer; events related to the entrada are retrospectively described on local Stela 22, dated 504 (Proskouriakoff 1993:8). Apparently, the memory of Sihyaj K'ahk' remained a source of legitimacy for the kings of El Peru and Uaxactun more than a hundred years after the conquest. In this context, it seems highly unlikely that K'an Kitam or Chak Tok Ich'aak III would have risked a break with Teotihuacan when their neighbors to the west and north were loyal to the Mexican hegemon.

An important piece of evidence of the duration of Tikal's cultural and political contacts with Central Mexico is the murals of Tetitla, one of the residential compounds of Teotihuacan, situated west of the Avenue of the Dead. They represent a mixture of Mexican and Maya motifs (Helmke and Nielsen 2013; Taube 2003). The murals were created by a Teotihuacan artist or a team of artists well-versed in Maya writing, art, and mythology. Among other things, a Maya hieroglyphic text, which may have originally come from Tikal, was copied onto the walls. Unfortunately, only small fragments of the inscription survive today, but Christophe Helmke was able to recognize in it the name of Sak Hix Muut, the divine ancestor and patron of the "holy Mutul lords" (Helmke and Nielsen 2013; see also Stuart 2007b). We do not know exactly how craftsmen from Teotihuacan obtained the references for their work. Theoretically, they could reproduce some text known to them on their own. According to another version, the prototype of the Tetitla inscription was created by a scribe from Tikal who resided in Central Mexico at the time. Either way, the text told the audience at Teotihuacan of events that were important from the point of view of Mutul kings (Helmke and Nielsen 2013). Based on paleographic analysis, the paintings are dated to approximately 472-539, and their appearance means that friendly relations between Teotihuacan and Tikal were maintained at that time.

Thus, the available sources give no evidence of a confrontation of Tikal with Teotihuacan in the 5th century whatsoever. In our opinion, the disappearance of Mexican motifs from Tikal monumental art is a normal consequence of the cultural assimilation of strangers and their absorption into Maya society. It was a long and gradual process. Mutul rulers tried to organically combine the Mexican tradition with the local one at first and made a logical choice in favor of the latter further on. Teotihuacan was located far from Peten, so members of the foreign elite could not rely only on military backing to maintain long-term control. To retain power, they had to seek a mutual understanding with the local population. However, the assimilation of Teotihuacan natives in and of itself does not indicate that they were politically hostile to their former homeland. On the contrary, Tikal kings remembered and took pride in their descent from Jatz'oom Kuy as late as the 8th century (Martin and Grube 2008:45; Stuart 2000:490).



Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras in the Politics of Hegemons

Important events that took place between 508 and 518 in the Usumacinta River Valley located west of Peten shed light on the nature of Teotihuacan's relationship with Tikal and other Maya cities. There, hostilities between two powerful opponents, Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras, had lasted for decades. In particular, the seventh Yaxchilan lord Jatz'oom Jol and his successor Yaxuun Bahlam II won victories over the Piedras Negras ruler Itzam K'an Ahk I and a military commander of the latter in the second half of the 5th century (Martin and Grube 2008:140; Styuflyayev 2023; Styuflyayev and Stadnik n.d.). Not only did the regional conflict on Usumacinta fail to stop, but it also attracted new participants in the following generation. Evidence for this appears in the text of Yaxchilan Lintel 37, which lists the successes of the ninth local king "Knot-eye" Bahlam I (for the reading of his name, see Martin 2004a:4, n. 10) (**Fig. 6**). First, "Knot-eye" Bahlam I captured Chak Mat Yax Ukuum, a military leader subordinate to the Ak'e' ruler, sometime before 508. In the 8th century, the Ak'e' emblem glyph was held by Bonampak kings, but the early seat of this dynasty is currently unknown (Beliaev and Safronov 2009; Mathews 1980:61). The next victim of the Yaxchilan king was K'an Tok Lakam Ixiim? Wayaab, a warlord who served a ruler named Yat Ahk (Lopes 2005). The latter has no emblem glyph on Yaxchilan Lintel 37, so various assumptions have been made in the literature about where he ruled. Linda Schele and Peter Mathews believed Yat Ahk had been an Ak'e' king (Schele and Mathews 1991:239; see also Bíró 2011:87), but this interpretation does not seem convincing. The prisoner from Ak'e' is clearly distinguished from the next captive in the hieroglyphic text, so Yat Ahk must have ruled somewhere else. It is known that king Yat Ahk II ruled in Piedras Negras around the same time. There is hardly any doubt that it is he who is mentioned on Yaxchilan Lintel 37. Thus, "Knot-eye" Bahlam I defeated the alliance of Ak'e' and Piedras Negras (Martin and Grube 2008:120). He built on the success of these first triumphs and captured Aj Bahlam K'ojbaal Ohlis K'uh (for the reading of his name, see the Maya Hieroglyphic Database, Mayadatabase.org; see also Stuart 2020), a military commander of Tikal king Chak Tok Ich'aak III, on August 10, 508. Interestingly, Chak Tok Ich'aak III himself had died only two weeks earlier; as David Stuart has shown, his death is mentioned on Tonina Monument 160 (Graham et al. 2006:95–101; Martin 2003:17; Tokovinine 2013:96). It is unlikely that we have a coincidence here. Most likely, Chak Tok Ich'aak III arrived with his army to the Usumacinta region as an ally of Piedras Negras and Ak'e' but was defeated and killed in one of the battles.

The defeat of Tikal probably created a threat to Teotihuacan's position in the Maya lowlands and motivated the Mexican hegemon to support his allies more actively. As Piedras Negras Panel 2 says, Yat Ahk II took the Mexican mosaic helmet *ko'haw* in the presence of "western *kaloonte*" Tajoom Uk'ab Tuun on November 14, 510 (blocks O1-V2; see Stuart 2000:499). Such headdresses made of worked shells are among the elements of Mexican warriors' equipment on Maya monuments (Taube 2000:271–273). Besides Piedras Negras Panel 2, Yat Ahk II taking the helmet is mentioned on a wooden box found in a cave in Tabasco. Unfortunately, key fragments of this second text are lost, but it calls Tajoom Uk'ab Tuun the "lord of Wiinte'naah" and the *ko'haw*-taking ritual is preceded by a distance number of 155 days (Anaya Hernández, Guenter, and Mathews 2001; Skidmore 2002; Zender 2007). It is logical to assume that, like K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' before, the Piedras Negras king made a long 155-day journey to Teotihuacan, where he received an important symbol of military power (Martin 2020:243-245). Yat Ahk II took a helmet rather than a scepter because he was not crowned, but he started preparing for war at that time.

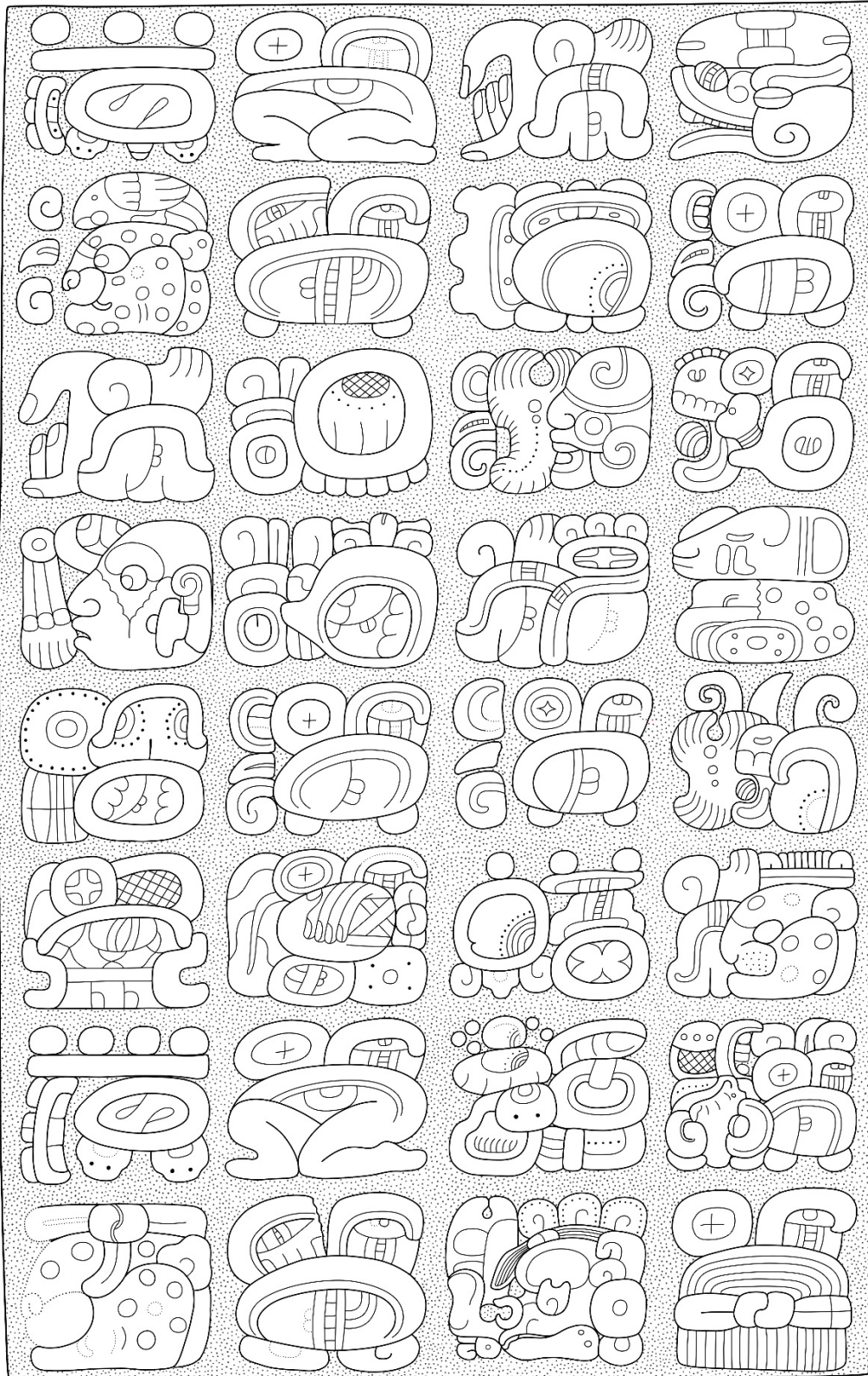


Fig. 6. Yaxchilan Lintel 37. Drawing by Marie Stadnik.

We do not know how exactly Tajoom Uk'ab Tuun helped Yat Ahk II, but Teotihuacan's intervention drastically changed the course of the conflict. The Yokib lord won a great victory soon after that. Piedras Negras Panel 12 shows four bound captives. Three of them are kneeling before the triumphant enemy, who is called a "vassal of the western *kaloomte*" in the text (Fig. 7). It follows from the captions to these figures that the Yaxchilan ruler "Knot-eye" Bahlam I was among those captured by Piedras Negras (Beliaev, Galeev, and Vepretskii 2016:144–147; Martin and Grube 2008:141; Schele and Mathews 1991:229). Thus, Yat Ahk II or his successor took full revenge on his opponents for the failures of the previous years. The exact date of the new successful war is unknown. Panel 12 was dedicated in 518, but its retrospective text begins with a reference to events occurring in 514, so the battle might have taken place during that period. It is worth adding that "Knot-eye" Bahlam I probably continued to rule in Yaxchilan after 518, so he retained the throne in exchange for the recognition of the political supremacy of Piedras Negras and Teotihuacan (Stuart 2007c). The Panel 12 scene vividly demonstrates the Yokib lords' superiority over their neighbors. Owing to the support of "western *kaloomte*" Tajoom Uk'ab Tuun, Piedras Negras became a regional hegemon and dominated upper Usumacinta for a time.



Fig. 7. Piedras Negras Panel 12. Photo by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

Thus, Teotihuacan remained powerful enough to intervene in the conflicts between Maya kingdoms and help its vassals in the early 6th century. Researchers have interpreted the rise of Piedras Negras in different ways. According to Stanley Guenter, Tikal had already gained independence from Teotihuacan by that time, so Yat Ahk II became the new defender of the Mexican empire's interests in the Maya lowlands (Guenter 2002:47-49). Building on these ideas, Dmitri Beliaev suggested that the Piedras Negras king acted as a vassal of Chak Tok Ich'aak III during the first war against Yaxchilan but defected to Tikal's opponents after his death and received the mosaic helmet at Teotihuacan because of that (Beliaev 2003). Such interpretations seem dubious to us. According to the sources, the rulers of Tikal, Piedras Negras and



Teotihuacan acted as allies in the fight against common enemies, mainly the Yaxchilan king “Knot-eye” Bahlam I, in 508-518. In our opinion, this means that a broad, Tikal-led coalition of Maya kingdoms recognizing Teotihuacan’s supremacy continued to exist as of 508 (see also Bíró 2017:49). Probably defeated in the war with Yaxchilan, Yat Ahk II first turned to Tikal for support. Chak Tok Ich’aak III tried to help his ally but was also defeated and killed during the campaign on Usumacinta. A period of internal turbulence began in Tikal and a young girl took the throne after that (Martin 1999; Martin 2014). Yat Ahk II then had no choice but to seek help in Central Mexico. His journey to Teotihuacan ended successfully, with Tajoom UK’ab Tuun contributing to the victory over the enemies. In response, the grateful Piedras Negras king pointed out on triumphal Panel 12 that he was a vassal of the “western *kaloomte*”.

To sum up, we believe that researchers have mistakenly considered Tikal’s prosperity in the 5th century to be a sign of it leaving the tutelage of the “western *kaloomte*”. We do not fully understand the nature of the relationship between the subordinate lords and the Mexican hegemon after the entrada yet. However, it would be a simplification to imagine the era of Teotihuacan dominance only as a time of oppression of Maya kingdoms by a powerful empire, a unilateral extraction of resources from a region of southeast Mesoamerica rich in valuables. Apparently, Sihyaj K’ahk’ relied on the support of a large community of Maya elites. One should not forget that Yax Nuun Ahiin I was only half foreign; as the text of Tikal Stela 1 suggests, his mother was probably of the old Mutul dynasty (Martin 2020:417, n. 8). The Maya rulers did not hide their political dependence. On the contrary, the memory of Sihyaj K’ahk’ and Teotihuacan remained a source of legitimacy for many dynasties, such as for the Copan kings, throughout the centuries. It is also telling that the 5th century, a time of active contact with Central Mexico, saw the heyday of some Maya kingdoms. Luxurious Rio Azul tombs, exquisite ceramics from El Zotz, massive sculptures from El Peru, and artistic masterpieces such as the Tikal Marcador or Stela 31 indicate subordinate rulers’ wealth and influence. The relations between the Maya elite and Teotihuacan were mutually beneficial.

The New Era

One might think the potential threat to Teotihuacan supremacy was eliminated owing to the triumphs of the Yokib rulers, but Piedras Negras Panel 12 is the last known example of the Mexican empire’s direct involvement in Maya political affairs. The western hegemony suddenly disappeared from the scene after 518. The reasons for this should probably be sought in the changes that took place in the very heart of their domain. According to archaeological data, an unknown enemy burned the structures in the central part of Teotihuacan around 550-575 (Beramendi-Orosco et al. 2021:1082). The largest city of pre-Columbian America never fully recovered from that blow. Research has shown that both the perpetrators of the disaster and the defeated belonged to the same Teotihuacan culture. Thus, we can talk about either an internal political conflict or an uprising of neighboring communities dissatisfied with the power of the metropolis (López Luján et al. 2006:28–32). We do not know the details of this profound crisis, but if one assumes that the weakening of Teotihuacan was gradual, control over distant peripheries such as the Maya lowlands may have been lost even before the burning of the city itself.

It is plausible that these fatal changes in Central Mexico became the catalyst that shook the foundations of the Maya political system (see also Bíró 2017:48–50; Willey 1974:422–423). Teotihuacan’s withdrawal inevitably weakened the position of its main allies, primarily the “holy Mutul lords.” Tikal plunged into a dark transitional period for three decades after the death of Chak Tok Ich’aak III, most likely due to internal



instability and power struggles among various factions within the ruling dynasty. Piedras Negras also went through hard times during that era; we hardly know anything about its history in the second half of the 6th century, but archaeological excavations show that the palace and other buildings at the site were sacked and burned around 550 (Houston et al. 2000:101–102). Recent studies of Copan texts show that the middle of the 6th century was a period of deep crisis there as well (Bíró 2017; Tokovinine 2017). Thus, we have enough reasons to conclude that the rulers of Teotihuacan lost their position as hegemon and the alliance created under their supremacy was disintegrated.

Instability in some kingdoms coincided with the rise of a new powerful force, the “holy Kanul lords,” whose seat was then located at Dzibanche (Martin and Velásquez García 2016). In parallel with the worsening crisis at Tikal, they launched a large-scale expansion in Peten after 520. Over the following decades, the key Tikal allies or vassals (El Peru, Naranjo, Caracol, and others) fell one by one under the auspices of Kanul kings. Finally, Tikal ruler Wak Chan K’awiil suffered a crushing defeat in a war against Kanul in 562 (Martin 2020:245–248; Vepretskii 2021). All these events, which changed the course of Maya history, have been well known for a long time. It is less clear how the rise of Kanul rulers was related to the end of the era of Teotihuacan’s dominance.

Stanley Guenter once presented Kanul and Teotihuacan as irreconcilable antagonists (Guenter 2002). Such a view is indeed not entirely groundless. Dzibanche rulers clearly took advantage of the weakening of the Mexican empire and took the now-vacant position of hegemon in the Maya lowlands (Martin 2020:245). However, we have no reliable evidence of their hostility towards Teotihuacan. On the contrary, Kanul rulers, like other Maya kings, used Mexican symbols and heritage for their own legitimation (see also Stuart 2024:107-108). One of the members of this dynasty bears the posthumous title of “person from Wiinte’naah” on the lid of a vessel of unknown provenance now kept in the Museum zu Allerheiligen (Schaffhausen, Switzerland) (Prager 2004:36–38; Tokovinine 2013:78–79). Moreover, Wiinte’naah is recorded as a toponym in the inscription on Dzibanche Fragment 7 (Stuart 2024:4-5). In addition, Dzibanche’s largest pyramid, the Temple of the Cormorants, was built with Mexican talud-tablero architectural elements, and its facade is decorated with both Teotihuacan and Maya symbols (Canuto, Auld-Thomas, and Arredondo Leiva 2020:383; Estrada-Belli 2011:138; Nalda 2003). Besides that, on Late Classic Stela 1 and Element 33 from La Corona, the name of the Kanul lord Yuknoom Yich’aak K’ahk’ is preceded by the unusual additional epithet Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan (“18 images of serpent”), which was the name of the Teotihuacan War Serpent deity whose cult was brought to the Maya area from Central Mexico after the entrada (Stuart 2012; Taube 2000). Finally, Alexandre Tokovinine recently discovered the mention of Sihyaj K’ahk’ on the Hieroglyphic Stairway at El Resbalon, a site that was located only 12 km north of Dzibanche and was within his sphere of influence during the Early Classic (Tokovinine and Balanzario 2023). These facts make one wonder whether the Kanul kings were likewise vassals to Teotihuacan and, accordingly, allies of their future enemy, Tikal, from the end of the 4th to the beginning of the 6th century.

Unfortunately, we currently lack solid evidence to answer this question with confidence. However, it is interesting to focus on the text of Yaxchilan Lintel 35 (Fig. 8). This monument commemorates the achievements of the tenth local ruler K’inich Tatbu’ Jol II. On closer inspection, they look like a mirror repetition of the triumphs of “Knot-eye” Bahlam I. In both cases, military commanders of the Ak’e’ rulers were captured, and the culmination of the account is a precisely dated triumph over a more powerful adversary. But there is also an important difference; the main enemy this time is not Tikal, but the Kanul king Tuun K’ab Hix (Martin and Grube 2008:121; Mathews 1988:73–78). The intervention of the latter in

conflicts on the upper Usumacinta could simply be an episode of Kanul expansion, which was gaining momentum at the time, but it may also indicate that Tikal and Dzibanche had common goals and common enemies between 508 and 537. It is important to mention in this context that Tonina Monument 160 mentions the death of the Kanul ruler in 505 and Chak Tok Ich'aak III in 508 side by side (see also Vepretskii 2021).

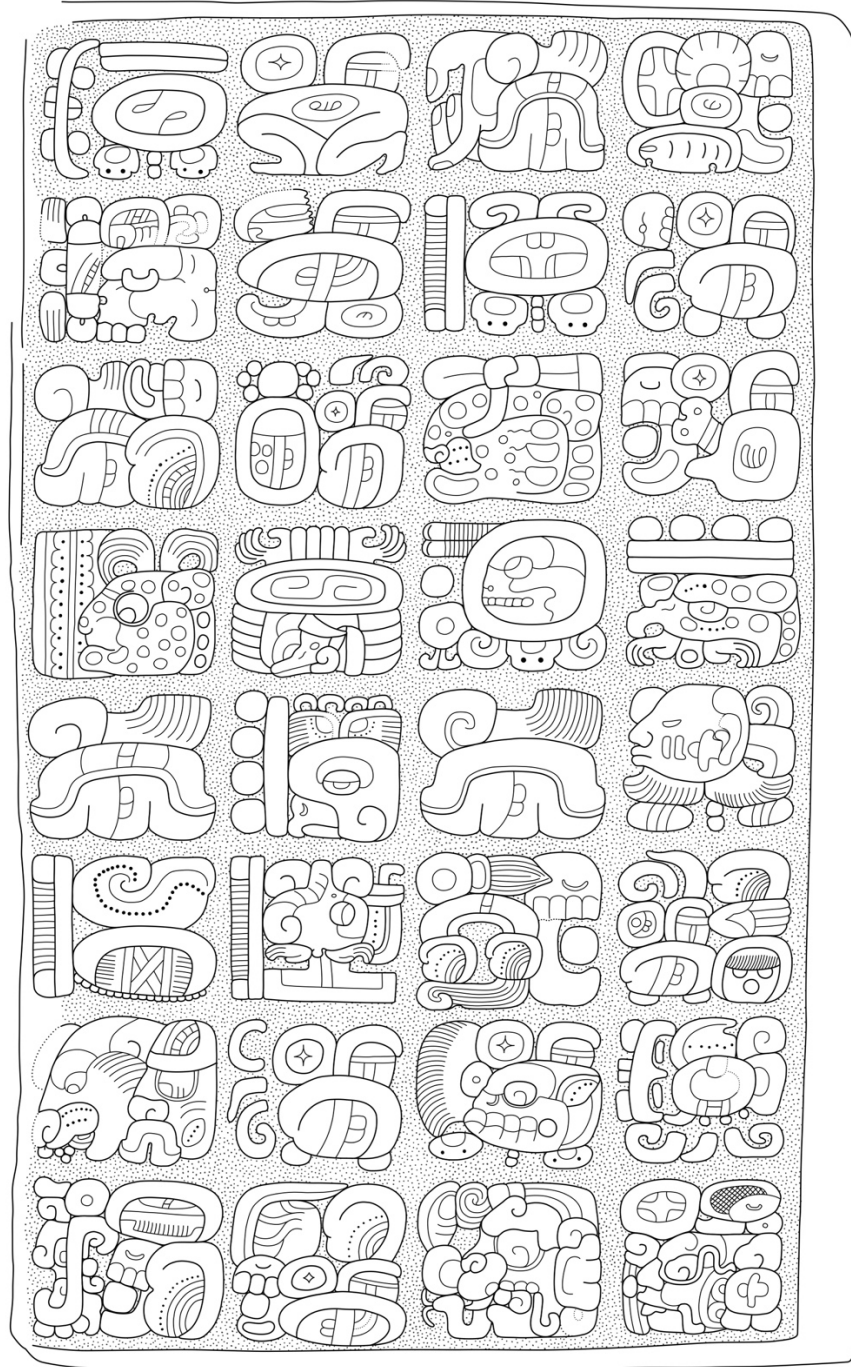


Fig. 8. Yaxchilan Lintel 35. Drawing by Marie Stadnik.



It was probably due to the decline of Teotihuacan that Tikal and Dzibanche lords adopted the title *kaloomte'*, the highest rank in the Maya political hierarchy, almost simultaneously.⁷ This title is very old and related to Maya ideas about the structure of the cosmos and cardinal directions (Martin 2020:79-80; Tokovinine 2013:94-95). Structurally, the epithet *kaloomte'* is very similar to the military titles *yajawte'* and *baahte'*, so apparently, it originally glorified the most prominent overlords as successful military leaders.⁸ It was borne by the ancient legendary ruler “Foliated Jaguar” on Tikal Stela 31 and by the second lord on Kanul Dynastic Vases (Martin 1997:856; Martin 2003:6–7). Moreover, as it was recently discovered, a certain *kaloomte'* was mentioned on Naachtun Altar 8 shortly before 378 (Nondédéo et al. 2023:20). However, during the era of Teotihuacan dominance, the status of *kaloomte'* was held by Mexican foreigners only: Sihyaj K'ahk', Jatz'oom Kuy, and Tajoom Uk'ab Tuun. There is a commonly held opinion that the title itself is of Mexican origin and was brought by conquerors after 378 (Davletshin 2004; see also summary in Kováč and Barrois 2012:117–120), but it is more likely that the authors of the Maya texts simply demonstrated Teotihuacan superiority by giving its rulers their local highest rank. That is why mentions of the Mexican emperors required the additional cardinal direction “western *kaloomte'*,” which indicated the geographical origin of the powerful rulers from the west, i.e. from Teotihuacan.

It is highly important that none of the prominent Tikal kings who ruled between 379 and 508 titled themselves as *kaloomte'* on monuments. Such a show of “modesty” was prompted by their subordinate status in relation to Teotihuacan (Martin 2020:80). As studies by the Proyecto Atlas Epigráfico de Petén have shown, K'an Kitam is called the “western K'awiiil” on Tikal Stela 40, dated 468 (block D17) (**Fig. 9**, left). Moreover, Chak Tok Ich'aak III bears a similar title posthumously on the later Tikal Stela 17, erected by his son Wak Chan K'awiiil (blocks G8-H8) (Beliaev et al. 2013:84–89, 552). Dmitri Beliaev interprets these facts as evidence of the liberation of Tikal from Teotihuacan's control and the beginning of independent political activity of Mutul lords (Beliaev 2019). Such an interpretation seems dubious to us. Tikal Stela 40 contains Mexican symbolism and is very similar to the earlier Tikal Stela 31. It is unlikely that such a monument could be created to demonstrate a break with a former protector. We do not fully understand the meaning of the title “western K'awiiil” yet, but it is important that this is what Sihyaj K'ahk' is called on Tikal Stela 31 and Uaxactun Stela 22 (Grube and Martin 2000:70–71, 90–91; Stuart 2000:480) (**fig. 9**, right). If “K'awiiil” has the broad metaphorical meaning of “power” there (see Helmke and Awe 2016:11–16; Martin 2020:128–129), then the title probably signified a holder of power derived from the west, i.e. from Teotihuacan. We believe that the epithet “western K'awiiil” was associated with the practice of Maya rulers receiving K'awiiil scepters in the Mexican metropolis. It is interesting in this context that Altar Q describes the arrival of K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' from Teotihuacan to Copan as the “resting of K'awiiil” (*hil ook k'awiiil*) (Stuart 2004:238). No mentions of pre-accession journeys of fifth-century Tikal kings to Central Mexico have yet been identified. However, “holy Mutul lords” were descendants of Yax Nuun Ahiin I, who was crowned at Teotihuacan, so they may well have inherited his legitimacy by birthright. In our opinion, the use of the title “western K'awiiil” by K'an Kitam and Chak Tok Ich'aak III means that the rulers of Tikal took over the role previously played by Sihyaj K'ahk', i.e., they exercised supreme authority over Peten on behalf of the Mexican empire as its representatives.

⁷ For details on the epithet *kaloomte'*, see Martin (2020:77–83) and Stuart, Grube, and Schele (1989).

⁸ For the interpretation of the terms *yajawte'* and *baahte'*, see Lacadena García-Gallo (2010).

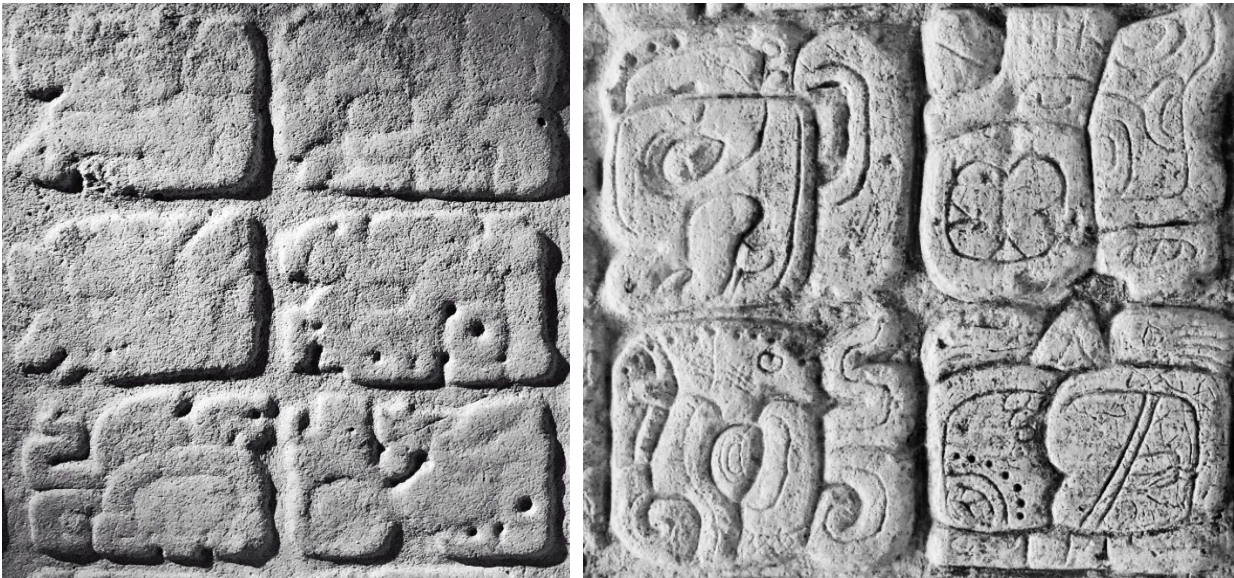


Fig. 9. The “western K’awiiil” title: Tikal Stela 40, blocks C15-D17 (left); Tikal Stela 31, blocks C21-D22 (right). Photos by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

As Teotihuacan declined, the status of the Maya kings changed. The children of Chak Tok Ich’aak III renounced the “western K’awiiil” rank and were the first to be titled as *kaloomte’* in Tikal after the entrada. On Tikal Stela 12, dated 527, the queen known as the Lady of Tikal bears the female version of this title, **IX-KALOOMTE’** (block C5). Her brother Wak Chan K’awiiil is called the “western *kaloomte’*” on painted plate K8121 in connection with the period ending ceremony in 554 (Grube and Martin 2000:157, 171). Around the same time in Dzibanche, K’ahk’ Ti’ Ch’ich’, who acceded in 550, became the first Kanul *kaloomte’* of the new era (Martin and Beliaev 2017:5–6). It is unlikely that this chronological coincidence is accidental. Tikal and Dzibanche had probably remained vassals of the Mexican *kaloomte’* during the preceding period despite playing a leading role in their respective regions. A series of military successes of the Kanul king Yuknoom Ch’een I is described on the Dzibanche Hieroglyphic Stairway (Velásquez García 2004; Martin 2004b). A clear hierarchy contributed to political stability and the establishment of lasting peace. We hardly have any evidence of wars in Peten during the 5th century. The first signs of internal conflicts only appeared at the beginning of the reign of Chak Tok Ich’aak III (Martin and Grube 2008:37). However, a vacuum of supreme power appeared in the Maya lowlands after the withdrawal of Teotihuacan. Both Tikal and Dzibanche asserted their claims to the status of the new hegemon, as evidenced by the adoption of the *kaloomte’* title by both sides. The competition for leadership between them resulted in a series of devastating wars and determined the course of Classic Maya history.

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