

61

A Yaxchilan-style Lintel Possibly from the Area of Retalteco, Petén, Guatemala

Stephen Houston
Brown University

Charles Golden
Brandeis University

A. René Muñoz
University of Arizona

Andrew K. Scherer
Wagner College

Introduction: The Recovery of a Looted Yaxchilan-style Panel

In July 2004, the Defensores de la Naturaleza, headquartered in Santa Elena, Petén, Guatemala, acted with the Guatemalan National Police to seize two sculpted stones from looters. The sculptures came from the area of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park, a relatively new ecological and archaeological reserve in the northwestern Petén co-administered by the Defensores and the Consejo Nacional de Áreas Protegidas of Guatemala (CONAP). Informed of the recovery of these monument fragments, Golden and Muñoz traveled to Santa Elena, where they photographed and measured the stones.

This report focuses on one of these monuments, a fragment of a finely carved door lintel in the Yaxchilan style. The other sculpture is a crudely sketched human face carved on a circular piece of limestone (Figure 1). The stone

itself may have been used to seal a *chultun* or cistern. During reconnaissance of the Park similar disks were found associated with cisterns, but none of these objects were carved in the same way. As a cistern cap, then, the piece is probably Prehispanic. A gross, initial inspection of the incision work seems to indicate that it, too, had a Prehispanic date. Still, without comparative materials or inspection with precision instruments there remains the possibility that the incised face is more recent. Looters may simply have wished to enhance the value of a plain piece with some inexpert carving.

FIGURE 1: CISTERN OR CHULTUN COVERING, WITH INCISED HUMAN FACE



Physical Features of the Lintel

The Yaxchilan-style lintel is of limestone (Figures 2 and 3). It measures 90 cm at its base, 96.5 at its broken, top edge, 41 cm on its left edge, 34 on its right. Thickness varies from 8.8 cm on the left edge to 12 cm on the bottom. The

original height of the carving must have been in the neighborhood of 85 cm – note the sample of measurements from roughly coeval lintels at Yaxchilan itself, which show a tendency of images to be slightly wider than they are high (Table 1). The lintel has been shaved from its original size, perhaps for ease of transport by looters (Figure 4). The back was thinned by two-thirds. It had a probable, original thickness of about 35 to 40 cm; the bottom edge was cleanly sawn to facilitate transport – by comparison with lintels from Yaxchilan, the bottom and disappeared top were the elongated parts of the carving that mortised into the building.

FIGURE 2. DRAWING OF THE LINTEL FRAGMENT (by Stephen Houston)

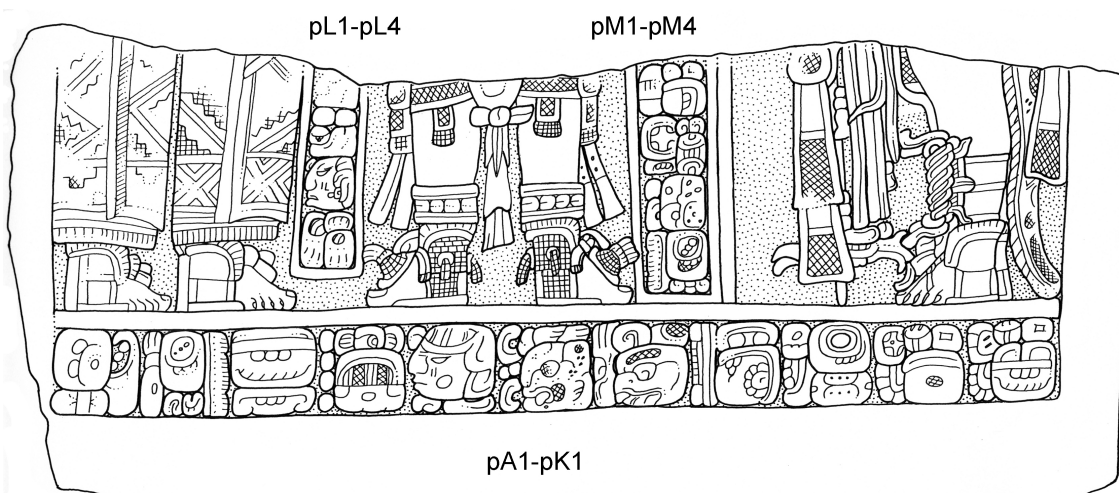


FIGURE 3. DIGITAL IMAGE OF THE SCULPTED FACE OF THE LINTEL FRAGMENT



FIGURE 4: SAWN BACK OF THE LINTEL FRAGMENT



Almost certainly, the principal figure faced to right, towards the entrance of the doorway spanned by the lintel. Condition is excellent, aside from the left third of the carving. Details of the glyphs and *huipil* wraps are slightly eroded, presumably because the area was closer to the surface of the rubble in which the lintel was found. If so, the building had collapsed forward. At this time the lintel may have split in two.

As with its peers at Yaxchilan, the sculpture has inset, low-relief carving. There are indications that the bottom, uncarved area represents the remains of a natural bedding plane in the limestone – note especially the evidence of exfoliation to the lower right. Even the glyphs, such as pM1, bear vestiges of this original, planar surface (Figure 5). The edges of carving are forcefully chiseled, with a slight batter and only faintly polished or rounded edges. The background, shown as stippling in the drawing, has also been chiseled from upper right to lower left. This chiseling was later smoothed in a final act of polishing. We cannot know how the chisel was held, but the thrust of carving

suggests a right-handed sculptor, chisel in left hand, mallet in right. There is a hint that the left side of the carving -- that with two women -- had a different finish. The carving here is more finely rounded and may show the work of a second sculptor. An imperfection in the stone, or perhaps the remnants of a rectified error in carving, slashes laterally across the thigh of the figure to the right (Figure 6).

FIGURE 5: CLOSE-UP VIEW OF GLYPHS



Text and imagery

The lintel shows four people, two men and two women. The surviving text, however, refers to three. These are: Bird Jaguar IV, a secondary lord or *sajal*

known as K'an-tok-wayib, and a lady mentioned elsewhere at Yaxchilan as Ixmut-bahlam. Bird Jaguar is the main figure in the lintel, and the person that the viewer entering the doorway would have seen looking outwards. We are fortunate in this case to be in possession of what must have been one of his very last images: Bird Jaguar is celebrated as a 4-k'atun *ajaw*, or between the ages of 60 and 80 years of age. No other such references are attested, so he must have been shown very close to his time of death. Bird Jaguar's birth is known to have been 9.13.17.12.10 in the Maya Long Count (Aug. 23, AD 709, Julian). He would thus have shifted to the 4-k'atun title at 9.16.17.12.10 (Oct. 12, AD 768, Julian), a few months after the date thought to have been the latest of this ruler, 9.16.17.6.12 (on Yaxchilan Lintel 9, June 16, AD 768, Julian, Mathews 1988:234-235). Peter Mathews (1988:292) believes that Bird Jaguar's successor, Shield Jaguar II, "was in effective power of Yaxchilan by 9.17.0.0.0 [Jan. 20, AD 771, Julian]."

The dating can be bracketed even further. Carolyn Tate (1992:94-96) offers persuasive evidence that a particular event known as the "flapstaff" dance, [**ja-sa-wa-CHAN**] in glyphs, took place at the summer solstice or close to it, with a variance of plus or minus 2 to 3 days. If the 4-k'atun notation on the new lintel is reliable, and not simply a scribal error, the only options for its date are on or about June 21, AD 769 or June 21, AD 770, both in the Julian calendar. (The missing Calendar Round was in the missing top fragment; the other flapstaff references, on Yaxchilan Lintels 9, 33, hint that there was very little else in that portion of text.) In this, Bird Jaguar's last contemporary image, he is shown with his principal warrior (see below) and principal spouse. His titles are standard, the ones most often associated with him, including the name of his main captive Aj-uk, his tally of 20 captives, and a favored sequence of the Yaxchilan emblem glyphs (Mathews 1988:Table 3-1). The base of the flapstaff can be seen just to the side of Bird Jaguar, on the other side of the vertical glyph band.

The female to the left of Bird Jaguar held *ix-ajaw* (princess) rank at the site of Hix Witz, recently identified by David Stuart with the ruins of Pajamal and Zapote Bobal, and possibly other sites to the east of the Sierra Lacandona. (The Emblem seems also have been used at La Honradez, Guatemala [e.g., St. 2, base, St. 5:A3], but that connection is an unresolved mystery—was this site the original homeland of the Hix Witz dynasty?) Apparently, she was a late and important spouse of Bird Jaguar's, but not, it seems, the mother of his successor, Shield Jaguar (see Mathews 1997:173-233; Martin and Grube 2000:131). Here as elsewhere she appears with the title of *Ixik-bakab*, an honorific borne only by the most distinguished ladies. Clearly, too, she is the first woman to the left of the central figure. Her hand appears to clutch a barely visible blood-letter (cf. Yaxchilan Lintels 13, 14, Stelae 11, 16). The other lady is not named in the surviving fragment of the lintel, although it is probable that she was one of three

ladies known to have been consorts of Bird Jaguar (Martin and Grube 2000:131). Given that two of these females were of *ajaw* rank, the best candidate for this leftward, subordinate position would be “Lady Great Skull,” who possessed mere *sajal* status. (A hitherto unknown female is, of course, another possibility.) On the lintel both women have textiles with serrations and T-shaped forms that recall huipiles on Yaxchilan Lintels 5, 17, 38, and Stela 35, also from Bird Jaguar’s reign. The bells (?) on his shins are very similar to footwear on his late monuments as well.

FIGURE 6: CLOSE-UP SHOWING IMPERFECTION ON THE RIGHT HAND SIDE OF LINTEL



The noble, K’an-tok-wayib, was crucial to many of Bird Jaguar’s victories. He carried the title of “first” or “head” *sajal*, with the unusual privilege of being labeled, first and foremost, as a successful warrior who had managed to take a

captive in one of Bird Jaguar's battles (Yaxchilan Lintel 8). The captive name occurs on the new lintel at pM1, perhaps [ko?~po?-TE'-AJAW]. He is the person to the right of the principal figure. In a sense he was the person shown entering the scene from outside – the direction of the doorway. He holds upright a centipede-jawed staff, perhaps issuing a small flint blade, and wears a jaguar pelt, probably the very same garment he displays on Yaxchilan Lintel 6. His distinctive shin-guard is closely correlated at Yaxchilan with blood-letting ceremonies in which a "holy" substance (k'uh) exudes from ruler's hands (cf. Yaxchilan Stelae 1, 3, 6, 7, La Pasadita Lintel 1).

Discussion

So far, the lintel prompts several plausible hypotheses: (1) it dates to the final years of Bird Jaguar IV's reign; (2) it can have only two dates, AD 769 or 770, presuming that Mathews is correct about the beginning date of Shield Jaguar's reign; (3) the central event relates to the summer solstice; (4) unusually, the subordinate appears to be dressed in garb that more properly belongs to rulers, including a shinguard associated with royal bloodletting; and (5) two ladies, including a royal one, are present, one, possibly, with bloodletting apparatus. It has also been possible to speculate that the lintel formed part of a structure that fell forward in its years of decay.

The missing piece of information is, regrettably, the precise, original location of the lintel. The find-spot is reliably reported to have been on Guatemalan territory. The Guatemalan police and the Defensores de la Naturaleza recovered the panel in the agricultural community of Retalteco, on the southern edge of the Sierra del Lacandón National Park. Residents informed the authorities that that the find-site of the sculpture was somewhere within a parcel of land known as "Centro Campesino," the former location of a small community across the Usumacinta River from Yaxchilan. Guides have told members of the Sierra del Lacandón Regional Archaeology Project about a significant archaeological site in Centro Campesino, known locally as "Tixan." In 2005, the Sierra del Lacandón Regional Archaeology Project (SLRAP) attempted to reach Tixan to identify the findspot of the monument. Unfortunately, the presence of a large illegal community at Centro Campesino prevented the team from exploring much of the area. Recent aerial reconnaissance confirms the presence of large, possibly monumental architecture in Centro Campesino. Thus, the area reported as Tixan represents the most likely source for the monument.

Other finds relating to Yaxchilan have been removed from the site of El Kinel in La Técnica, Guatemala (Houston et al. 2005; Morales 2001), along the Usumacinta River but upstream from Yaxchilan. The finds from La Pasadita,

which refer to *sajal* under the control of Yaxchilan, are well-known (Kamal et al. 1999). Those from El Kinel and Centro Campesino appear to belong to a distinct category: of sites that were directly under the control of the Yaxchilan dynasty, although the presence of K'an-tok-wayib raises the chance that the lintel came from a site that he governed. The unusual role of a blood-letter, ordinarily accorded to holy lords, contributes to this suspicion. What, finally, is most intriguing about the monument is the pervasive emphasis on this lintel and in the murals at La Pasadita on solstice flapstaff dances (Kamal et al. 1393-1394). Were these eastward-directed events, so focused on solar movement, of special relevance to a polity expanding in that direction? Future work by the Sierra del Lacandón Regional Archaeology Project will situate this lintel and other looted monuments within a broad and neglected landscape that formed, it now seems, the heart of the kingdom of ancient Yaxchilan.

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF LINTEL DIMENSIONS
(YAXCHILAN MEASUREMENTS FROM CHMI 3).

	Max. Width	Max. Height of Sculpture	Max. Thickness	Relief
YAX Lintel 1	94 cm	82 cm	40 cm	0.7 cm
YAX Lintel 2	113 cm	75 cm	37 cm	0.8 cm
YAX Lintel 3	96 cm	85 cm	38 cm	0.5 cm
New Lintel	96.5 cm	?	12 cm	ca. 7 cm

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