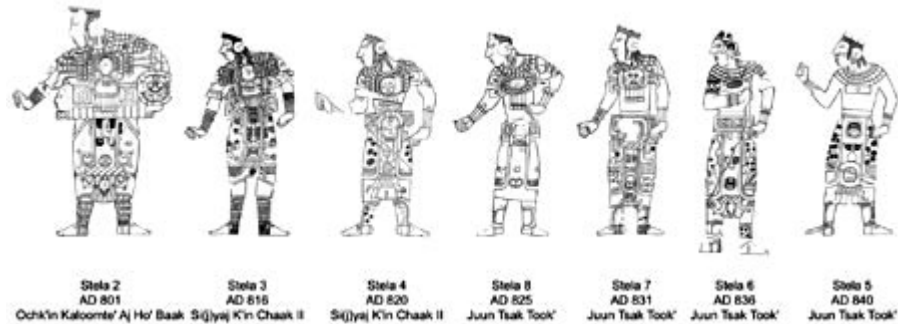


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Ninth-Century Stelae of Machaquilá and Seibal



Research Year: 2002

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Terminal Classic/Epi-Classic

Location: Pasión region, Petén, Guatemala

Sites: Machaquilá and Seibal

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Abstract

This report explores how ancient Maya artists and ruler-patrons adapted Late Classic Stelae iconographic and formal conventions to the dramatic socio-political changes of the ninth century A.D. at Machaquilá and Seibal. Sculptors at each site produced a series of ruler-portrait stelae proclaiming the political power of local kings following the violent demise of the region's dominant *Mutal* polity of the Petexbatún lakes region. Initially, sculptors at each site portrayed local ruler-patrons as the regional successors of Mutal kings by adopting the visual conventions of that polity. Subsequently, however, stelae at Machaquilá and Seibal diverged significantly. Machaquilá's conservative stelae presented increasingly streamlined, 'legible' compositions to stress socio-political stability and to encompass a wider potential audience, possibly including non-elite Maya and/or foreign audiences. In contrast, Seibal's artists heterogeneously employed old, new, and foreign visual devices. Seibal's late stelae implement traditional Maya visual conventions primarily to contrast with non-local modes of expression, reflecting a decline in the local visual system's social power. The eclecticism of Seibal's late stelae contradicts past proposals of foreign invasion and takeover. Instead, Seibal's local authorities chose to present themselves as 'cosmopolitan' in a context of increasingly international interaction.

Resumen

Este ensayo es un resumen de la tesis doctoral del autor, que explora cómo los artistas mayas y sus reyes patrocinadores adaptaron las convenciones iconográficas y formales de la escultura del Clásico tardío maya a los cambios políticos y sociales tan profundos del siglo IX en los sitios de Ceibal y de Machaquilá. Los escultores de cada sitio fabricaron una serie de estelas con los rostros de los reyes contemporáneos, proclamando el poder político de los reyes locales después de la caída violenta del dominio mutal, que estaba localizado alrededor de los lagos Petexbatún. Al principio, los artistas de cada sitio retrataron a los reyes locales como si fueran sucesores directos de los reyes mutales, por medio de las convenciones visuales del arte de Dos Pilas y los otros sitios mutales. Después, en cambio, las estelas de Ceibal y de Machaquilá divergieron dramáticamente. Las estelas de Machaquilá del siglo IX d.C., que son muy conservadoras, presentaron imágenes cada vez más sencillas y legibles, para enfatizar la estabilidad del poder del rey y para llegar a una audiencia incluyendo gente fuera de la clase 'elite' maya y tal vez a extranjeros. En cambio, los artistas de Ceibal emplearon una gran mezcla de las fuentes visuales, incluyendo convenciones mayas y de los otros grupos contemporáneos y extranjeros. Al final de la historia del Ceibal, las estelas incluyen referencias a las tradiciones artísticas mayas del Clásico tardío solamente para contrastar con las formas extranjeras. Parece que este proceso refleja una reducción en el poder social de las formas comunicativas visuales para indicar poder social. El eclecticismo artístico de las estelas tardías de Ceibal, que incluye una diversidad de influencias mayas y extranjeras, contradice las proposiciones

anteriores de que un grupo extranjero invadió y conquistó a Ceibal. Por el contrario, sugiere que los reyes locales se decidieron a presentarse a sí mismos como 'cosmopolitas' a través de un gran crecimiento en las interacciones 'internacionales.'

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Introduction

The continuity across dozens of cities in the form, function, and iconographic conventions of their large-format stone sculpture has long been considered a diagnostic feature of Late Classic (A.D. 600-800) Maya elite culture. At the same time that production of such sculpture reached its apogee in both quantity and artistic sophistication in the eighth century, the elite class grew dramatically in size and inter-polity warfare increased in frequency.¹ The resulting economic and social stress led to drastic changes in the ninth century, as one Maya polity after another ceased producing sculpture and was abandoned. Some polities, however, enjoyed new or renewed political success in the wake of this turmoil, effectively adapting to the changing social landscape. The sculpture of these polities both implemented Classic Maya visual conventions and incorporated innovations, some of which drew inspiration from 'non-Classic' Maya sources.

This study – a brief summary of the author's dissertation research – considers the ninth-century sculpture at two polities, Machaquilá and neighboring Seibal. Machaquilá and Seibal each enjoyed a brief political and artistic florescence in the ninth century, in the wake of endemic warfare that decimated the region's dominant political power in the latter part of the eighth century, namely the *Mutal* polity of the Petexbatún region. The stelae erected at Machaquilá and Seibal after the fall of Dos Pilas, the primary eighth-century capital of the *Mutal* polity, constituted distinct adaptive strategies that involved and modified Classic visual communicative conventions in different ways. Machaquilá's ninth-century stelae are remarkably conservative in both the basic composition and iconography of their imagery and in the structure and content of the accompanying hieroglyphic inscriptions. Over their regularly paced production sequence, however, Machaquilá's stelae evidence a gradual modification of the proportions of the human figure and a reduction of the manneristic sophistication typical of late eighth-century Classic sculpture, sequentially presenting ever-more streamlined and 'legible'

¹ Miller 1993; Stuart 1993. More accurately, explicit references to inter-polity warfare increased significantly in the eighth century (Stuart 1993).

compositions. This 'constricted' visual discourse suggests an insular development, though the formal changes may have facilitated recognition of subject matter for an audience less familiar with the obfuscating complexity of the eighth-century Maya visual culture. Seibal's stelae, on the other hand, exhibit a wide range of diverse inspirations, initially presenting a cacophony of Classic Maya visual devices, subject matter and iconography. Subsequently, new audiences seem to have inspired 'non-Classic' themes in the art of Seibal, resulting in heterogeneous, eclectic sculpture wherein Classic Maya conventions became mere 'tokens' of the cultural unity they once reified.

Machaquilá

The site of Machaquilá is located on the river of the same name, just to the east of the Pasión River in southeastern Petén, Guatemala ([Figure 1](#)). The region remains today rather inaccessible, due to the rough terrain of karst hills and sinkholes and to a lack of natural resources that attracted development of other regions of Petén.² Its secluded location harbored Machaquilá from much of the endemic warfare that decimated the neighboring Petexbatún region in the late eighth century. Machaquilá continued to produce stelae for almost forty years after the sites of the Usumacinta and Pasión drainages fell into artistic/hieroglyphic silence and many of the great Late Classic cities of the region were abandoned.³

Machaquilá prior to the fall of the Mutal polity

The majority of Machaquilá's stelae was encountered by Ian Graham in the relatively small Plaza A on the southeastern edge of the site center ([Figure 2](#)). The stelae of this plaza, sixteen in all, roughly form two rows in front of large pyramidal structures on the north and east sides of the plaza. These stelae belong to four smaller groups, each associated with a structure in front of which they stand. The stelae on the east side of Plaza A bear the earliest dates, with likely dedications in 9.14.0.0.0 [3 December 711] (Stela 13), 9.15.0.0.0 [20 August 731] (Stela 10), 19.15.10.0.0 [28 June 741] (Stela 11), and 9.16.10.0.0 [15 March 761] (Stela 12). The plain Stelae 14, 15, and 16 were all grouped further to the south, in front of Structure 16.

² Graham 1967:51; Lisi 1968.

³ Although Seibal could be considered an exception to this generalization, Machaquilá's sculptural florescence occurred during an apparent hiatus in sculptural production at that site.

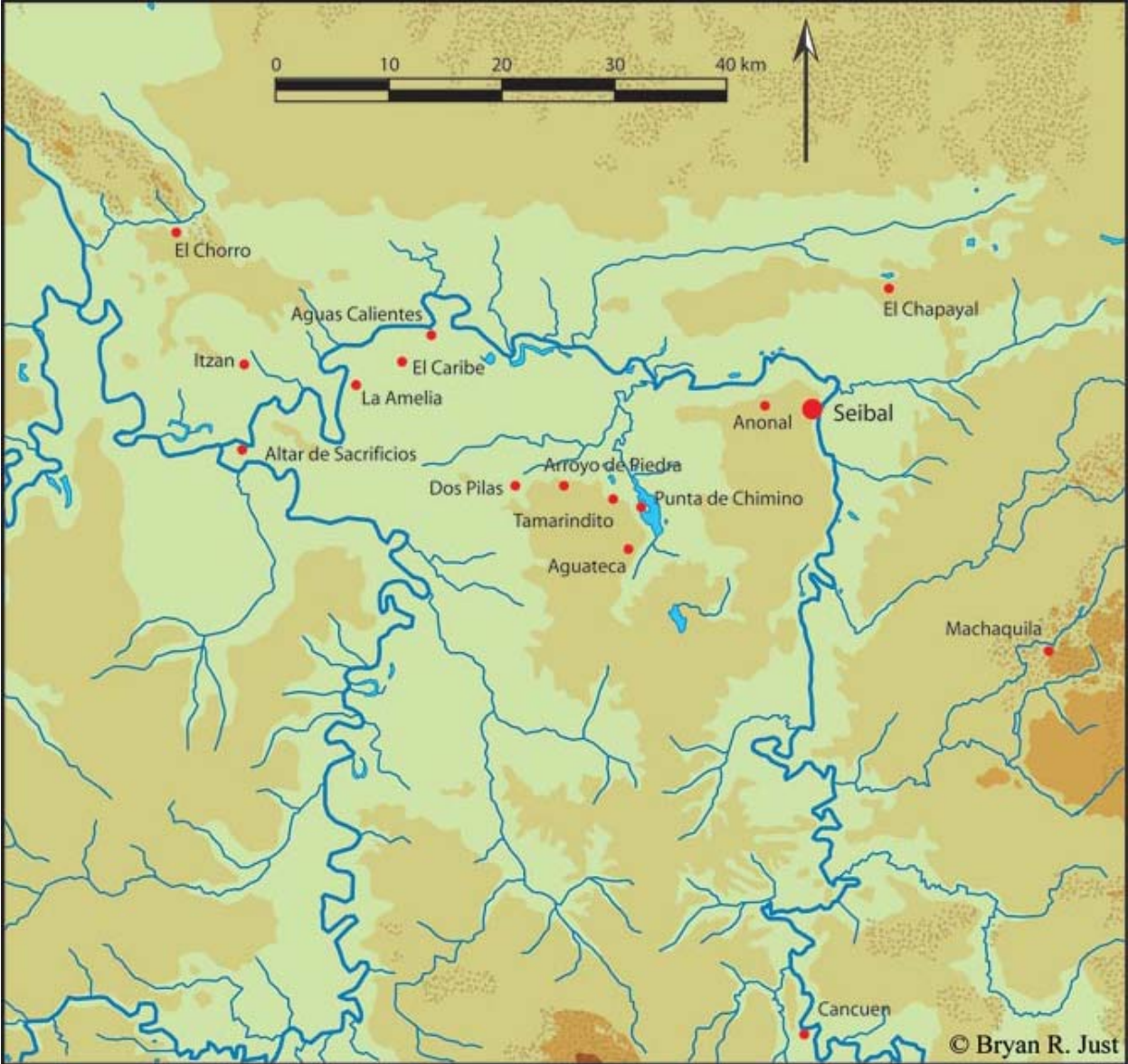


Figure 1. Archaeological sites in the Pasión river region.

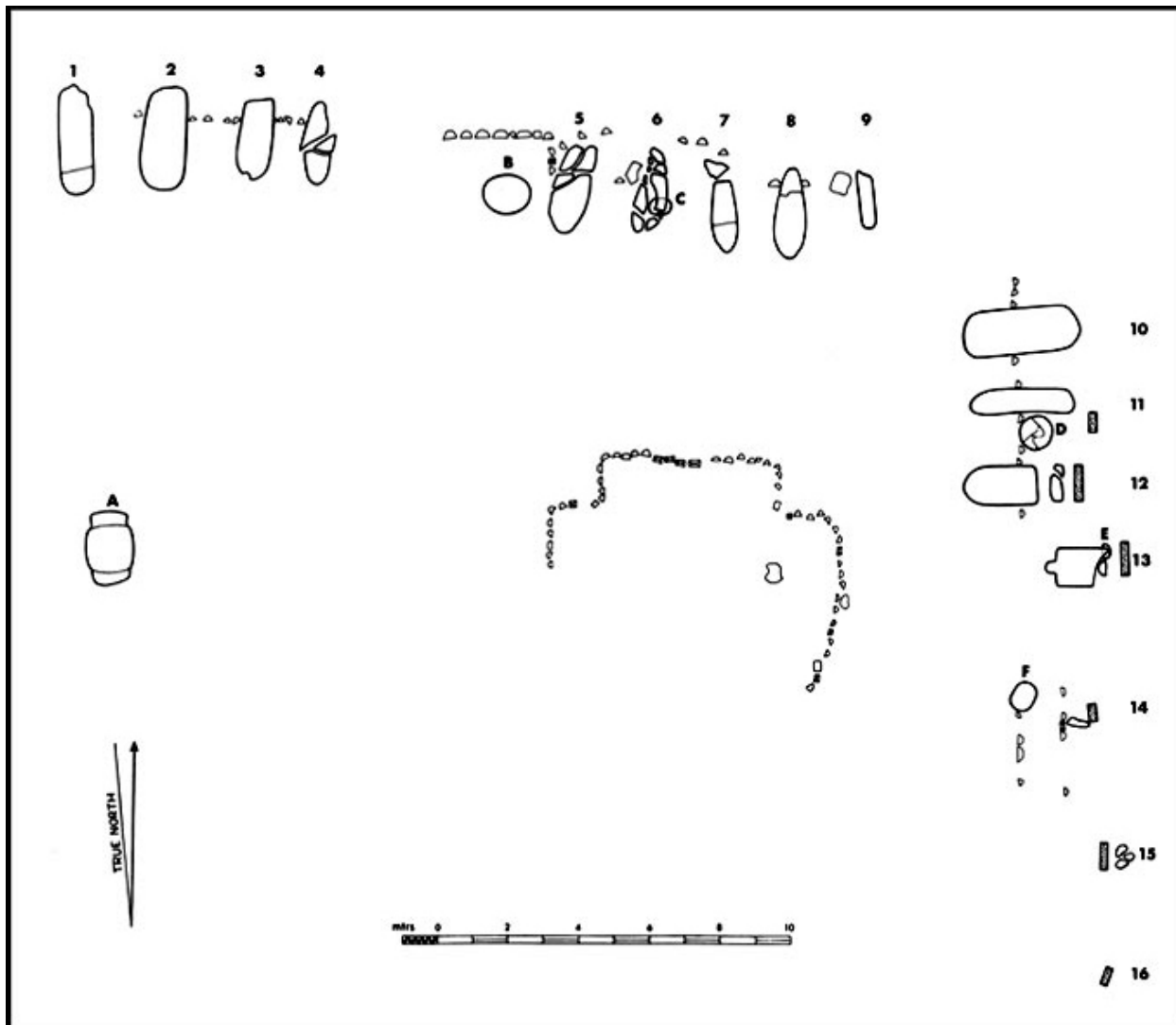
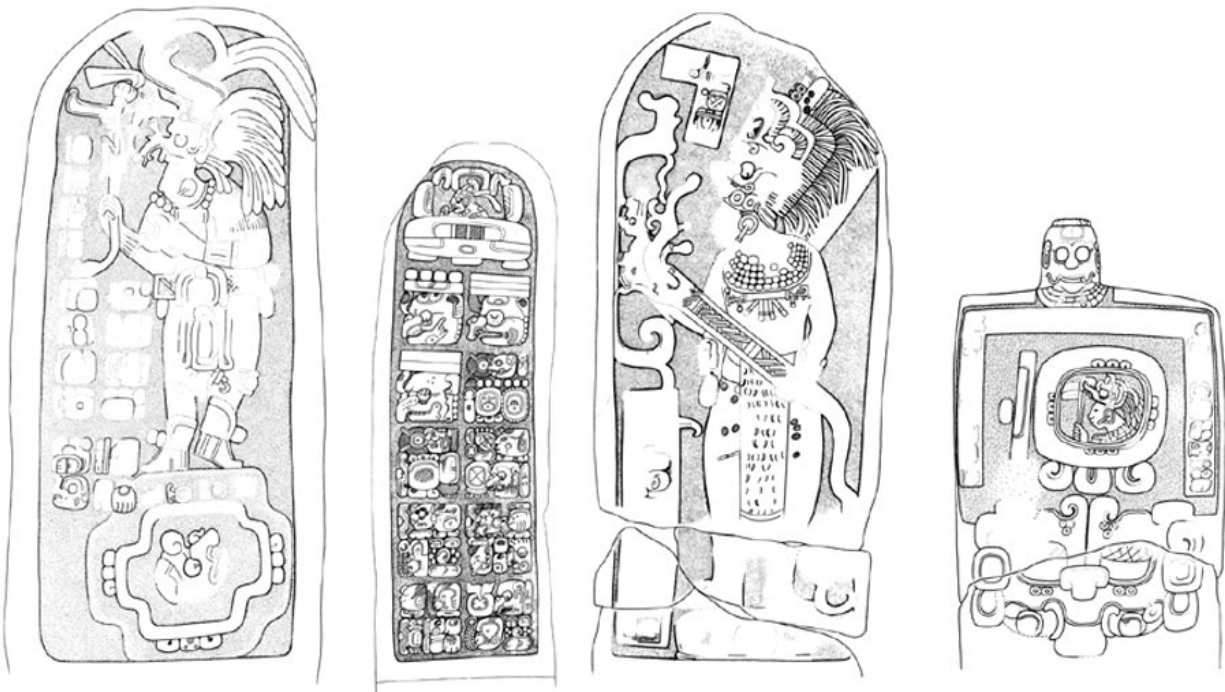


Figure 2. Arrangement of stelae in Plaza A, Machaquilá. Map by Ian Graham, courtesy of Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.



Stela 10

Stela 11

Stela 12

Stela 13

Figure 3. Machaquilá Stelae 10–13, line drawings to scale. After drawings by Ian Graham, courtesy of Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

While this study focuses upon the ninth-century stelae along the northern edge of Plaza A, it is important to note that these earlier sculptures establish several visual precedents for the site's late sculpture. For their production, local artists drew on various regional trends, resulting in a rather eclectic array of compositional types (Figure 3). Stelae 10–13 and their accompanying altars were probably commissioned by two sequent rulers, *Si(j)yaj K'in Chaak I* (Stela 13 and Altar E) and his son, *Yax 4? Pas Ajaw Ets'nab Chaak*, (Stelae 10, 11, and 12 and Altar F). Unlike the sculptural programs of most Classic Maya centers, Machaquilá's known stelae from A.D. 761 and earlier do not constitute – iconographically or formally – a visually coherent group. The variations in their overall shape and size add notably to this sense of dissimilarity. Through A.D. 761, then, Machaquilá was a site without a consistent local 'style,' displaying in its small Plaza A an eclectic amalgamation of sculptural types. Apparently, with little local sculptural precedent, Machaquilá's rulers and their artists drew inspiration from other Classic Maya polities, although none of the early stelae is a direct copy of some other polity's sculpture.

All of the known eighth-century sculptures produced after Stela 12 at Machaquilá were found outside of Plaza A. They include the hieroglyphic panels that once adorned Structure 4 in Plaza F, and three stelae, Stelae 17–19, all of which were found in Plaza C. When designing Stelae 18 (9.17.5.1.0 [27 December 775]) and 19 (date indeterminate), Machaquilá's artists and patron-rulers turned to the site's earlier

sculpture for inspiration, particularly to Stela 10 ([Figure 3](#)), presenting the ruler standing atop a quatrefoil motif, brandishing a *K'awiil* scepter, and impersonating the Water Lily Serpent.⁴ This deity, associated with water on the ground and by extension earthly abundance, seems to have become the central patron deity of Machaquilá, as his costume is worn by the rulers depicted on most of the site's ninth-century stelae. The Water Lily Serpent is indicated on Machaquilá stelae by the diagnostic, large, downward-turning nose of the head just above the face of the wearer, the lily tied around the headdress with its blossom extending out at the forehead of the deity's head, and the fish hanging down, nibbling on the lily blossom.⁵ This headdress is well-known from other Late Classic sculpture from throughout the Maya Lowlands. Although not a ubiquitous component of Water Lily Serpent iconography at other Maya sites, the angled platform motif, atop which is perched a shell-winged serpent, appears in all of its subsequent manifestations of the costume at Machaquilá.⁶

Stela 18 also introduced a curious 1,820-day interval for timing period-ending rites, a distinctive feature of Machaquilá's stela consecration timings. Stela 18 and each of the ninth-century stelae reference Calendar Round dates that fall shortly after the given *ho'tuun* ending and mark an alternative five-year interval. Whereas a *ho'tuun* is a period of five 360-day *tuuns*, these additional dates record periods of either 364-day 'computational years' or 365-day 'vague years.' Not only are these intervals closer approximations of the solar year, they also reproduce either the *tsolk'in* ($5 \times 364 = 7 \times 260 = 1,820$) or the *haab* ($5 \times 365 = 1,825$) date of the previous date. 1,820 is, in fact, the lowest common multiple of 260 and 364. On the ninth-century stelae, this calendrical patterning produces Calendar Round dates that include either the *tsolk'in* day 1 *Ajaw* in the month *Kumk'u* (if 1,820 is used) or the *haab* day 13 *Kumk'u* (if 1,825 is used). While the specific rationale of these calculations remains elusive, their use at Machaquilá, appearing so consistently on the site's late stelae, constitute a unique, local form of calendrical arithmetic and one facet of Machaquilá's late stelae 'template.'⁷

⁴ For illustrations of Machaquilá Stela 18, see Mayer (1989:Pl. 41) and Stierlin (1998:Pl. 212); Stela 19 remains unpublished.

⁵ Bowles 1974; Miller and Taube 1993:184; Schele and Miller 1986:47. There is at least one hieroglyphic record of this deity's name, on a panel from the site of Pomoná (cf. Schele and Miller 1986:Fig. III.12, top of right text column). The reference, however, reading 'YAX-CHIT / 1-? / NAAH (-? NOH) ka-KAN,' resists clear decipherment (Stephen Houston, personal communication via email, August 9, 2005). The same deity seems to be named on Machaquilá Stela 7, although only a portion of the name is legible. The traditional 'Water Lily Serpent' terminology is thus maintained herein.

⁶ These components are also attested at Dos Pilas (cf. Dos Pilas St. 14 [Graham 1967:Fig. 61]).

⁷ It is possible that this 1,820-day interval was used as an alternative to the 360-day *tuun* to track the coincidence of the *tsolk'in* with the 364-day year for its ritual import. That is, this use of the 1,820-day interval may index a growing interest in the affective potential of the *tsolk'in* on seasonal phenomena, such as rain and planting cycles. This possibility is complicated by the fact that the interval later shifts to 1,825 days, which lacks this correlation. Proskouriakoff (1993:181) wondered whether this alternate pattern of period endings may reflect interaction with non-Maya groups. Her hypothesis, however, was based on the pattern being exclusively a ninth-century phenomenon. Its link to the Maya 9.17.0.0.0 *k'atuun* ending, implied by Machaquilá Stela 18's inscriptions, supports a local, or at least 'Maya,' development. Additionally, neither 1,820-day nor 1,825-day intervals are intrinsically convenient for astronomical calculations, as they do not coincide with any astronomical cycles beyond the solar year.

Machaquilá after the fall of the Mutal polity

In what is still a poorly understood series of events, the last known king of the Mutal polity, *K'awiil Chan K'inich* 'went out' of the Petexbatún region on 9.16.9.15.3 [17 January 761].⁸ This marked the decline of the Mutal polity, which fell into endemic warfare in the final decades of the eighth century.⁹ In the remaining decades of the eighth century, lords of other sites in the region, characterized as 'petty kingdoms,' attempted to fill the void left by the dissolution of the *Mutal* polity.¹⁰ While several of these kingdoms claimed the *Mutal* Emblem Glyph as their own, others continued to use their own Emblem Glyph, proclaiming their continued autonomy. Cancuén, on the other hand, usurped power from Machaquilá and claimed dominion over the upper reaches of the Pasión River and its tributary, the Santa Amelia/Machaquilá.¹¹ However, this Cancuén/Machaquilá kingdom, united under *Tajal Chan Ahk* of Cancuén, did not last into the ninth century, as only five years later a new Machaquilá king, *Ochk'in Kaloomte' Aj Ho' Baak*, erected Stela 2 (9.18.10.7.5 [9 January 801], [Figure 4](#)), reclaiming his, and the Machaquilá polity's, political autonomy.

Although Stela 2's sculptor implemented the same basic composition and figural pose as used on Stela 18 and 19, he also incorporated a secondary figure, possibly an allusion to Cancuén, and a broad, densely-accoutered figure whose costume bore strong references to the stelae of the Petexbatún *Mutal* polity. Through these visual allusions and the use of the *K'aloomte'* and 'He of Five Captives' titles, *Ochk'in Kaloomte' Aj Ho' Baak* presented himself as a full-fledged, regionally powerful *K'uhul Ajaw*, one comparable to the past kings of the Petexbatún *Mutal* dynasty. This bold political proclamation may not have accorded with actual political history, however, for *Ochk'in Kaloomte' Aj Ho' Baak* did not erect another stela and Machaquilá's sculptural record fell silent for fifteen years.

Following this hiatus, the king *Si(j)yaj K'in Chaak II* directed Machaquilá's visual discourse inward with his two stela commissions. Stelae 3 (9.19.5.11.0 [6 January 816]) and 4 (9.19.10.12.0 [30 December 820]) synthesized iconography, formal conventions, and compositional precedents from Stela 2 and earlier Machaquilá stelae. Stela 3 ([Figure 5](#)) exhibited a number of significant formal adjustments to the visual discourse of extant Machaquilá stelae: (1) the figure's proportions were more slender, with longer legs and a narrower body; (2) the narrower form of the stelae shaft more closely followed the relief composition within; (3) details of costume and implements were reduced, though without any decline in the quality of execution; and (4) the hieroglyphic text was more brief than on Stela 2, focusing almost entirely on the period-ending and

⁸ Schele and Grube 1995:59; Martin and Grube 2000:63.

⁹ Since the 'going out' of *K'awiil Chan K'inich* was recorded at Tamarindito, it is possible that the Tamarindito/Arroyo de Piedra polity played some organizing role in ousting *K'awiil Chan K'inich* and the subsequent destruction of Dos Pilas. As Stephen Houston notes (personal communication via email, June 14, 2005), this important series of events in the history of the *Mutal* polity remains poorly understood.

¹⁰ Martin and Grube 2000:64-65.

¹¹ Machaquilá seems to have been conquered by *Tajal Chan Ahk* of Cancuén on or just before 9.18.5.5.19 [10 January 796], before Machaquilá Stela 17 could be completed. Cancuén made clever use of Machaquilá's curious calendrical patterning in its sculptures commemorating the conquest, implying that it prohibited Machaquilá from completing the calendrical period as an autonomous polity. For more on this conquest, see Schele and Grube (1994), Guenter (2002), Fahren and Jackson (2003), Kistler (2004), Zender (2004), and Zender and Skidmore (2004).

stela consecration ceremonies, associated both with the ho'tuun ending proper and with the locally distinctive 1,825-day anniversary interval. *Si(j)yaj K'in Chaak II* also took the name of an earlier local king, may have stressed dynastic continuity by using the poorly-understood 'foundation' (*wite' naah*) collocation in the inscription, and claimed regional political power by using the prestigious *Kaloomte'* title.

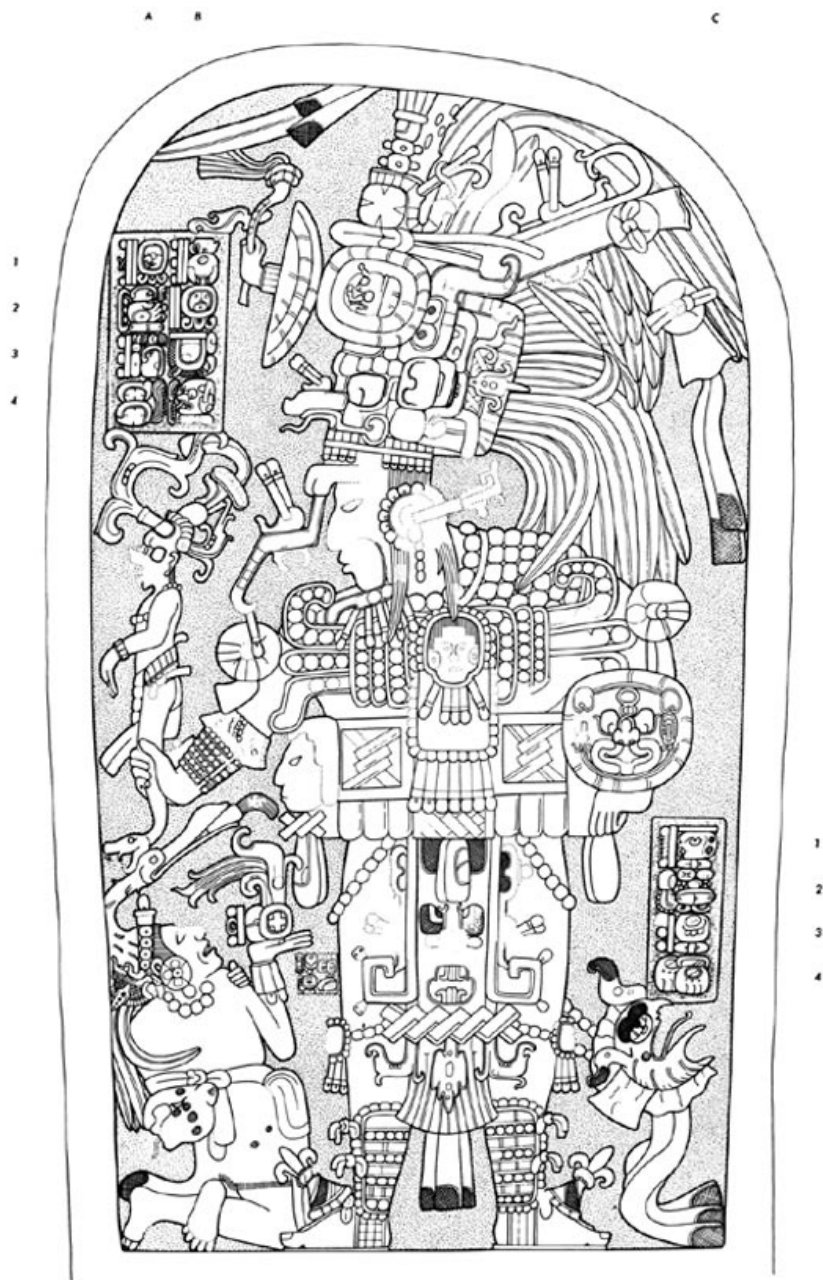


Figure 4. Machaquilá Stela 2. Drawing by Ian Graham, courtesy of Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

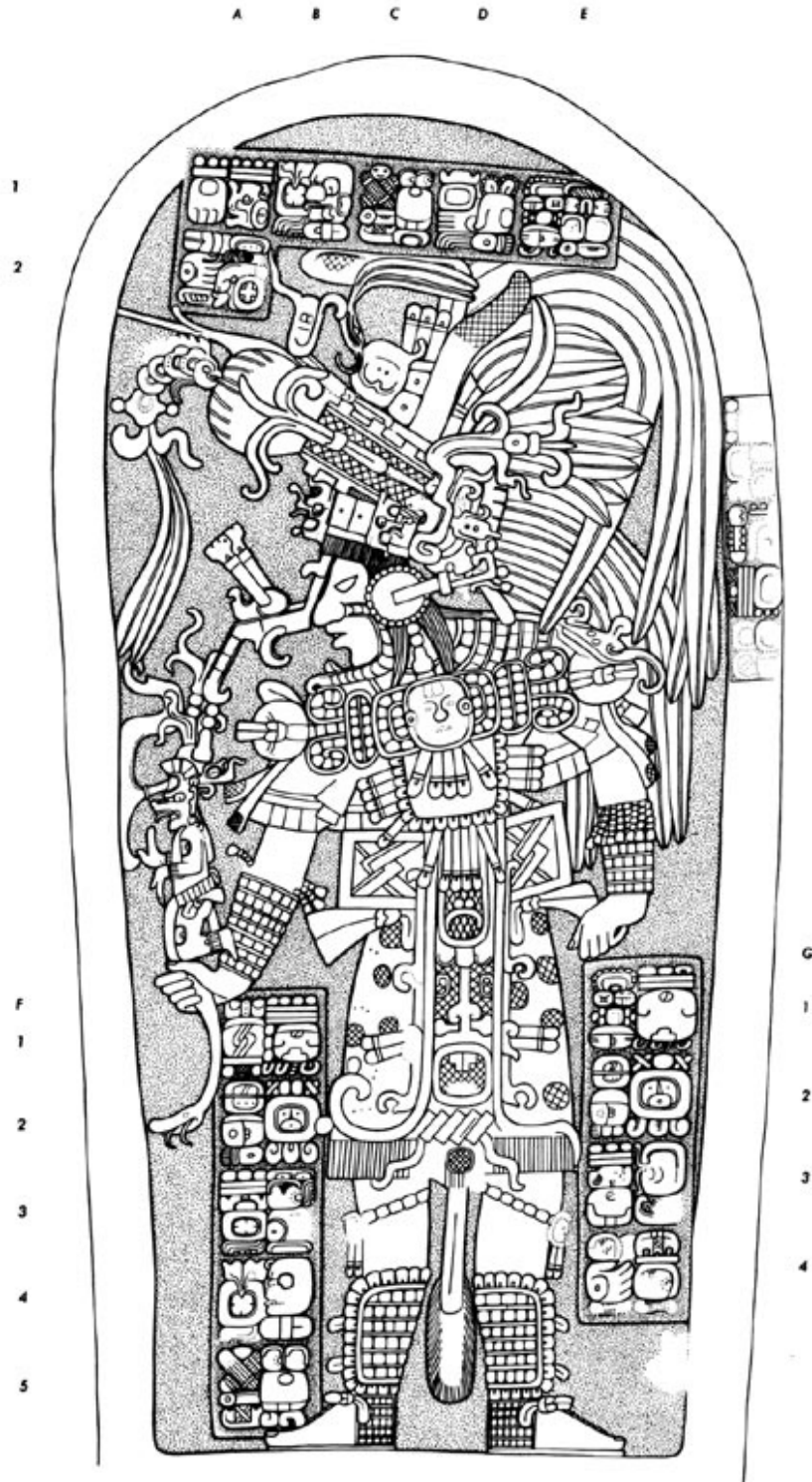


Figure 5. Machaquilá Stela 3. Drawing by Ian Graham, courtesy of Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

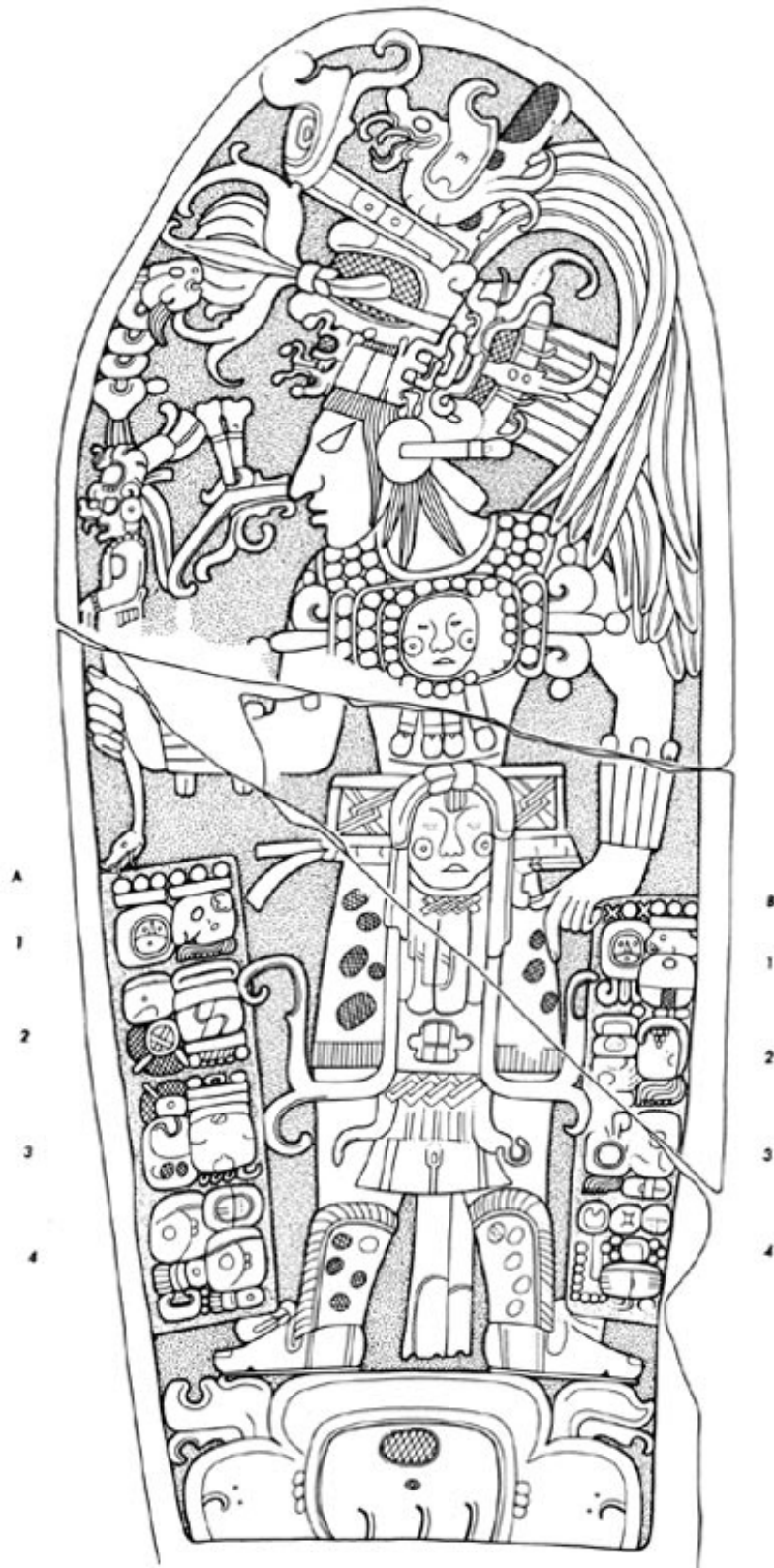


Figure 6. Machaquilá Stela 4. Drawing by Ian Graham, courtesy of Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

Si(j)yaj K'in Chaak II's second commissioned stela, Stela 4 ([Figure 6](#)), presented the king in the same guise and pose as Stela 3 and implemented a suite of formal adjustments that echo the relations between Stela 3 and its precedents, including further modification of human proportions and simplification of motifs ([Figure 12](#)). Stela 4 also reintroduced the quatrefoil shell-and-*Imix* basal motif and its text shifted back from a 1,825-day interval to a 1,820-day interval for the stela consecration timing, both of which were last implemented on Stela 18.

Considered together, the stelae commissioned by *Si(j)yaj K'in Chaak II* participated in a notably restricted, local visual discourse, drawing iconographic, compositional, and hieroglyphic inspiration exclusively from local precedents while making consistent adjustments to the formal 'conventions' of that discourse. These features may indicate Machaquilá's political isolation during *Si(j)yaj K'in Chaak II's* reign, reflect his desire and/or need to affirm his dynastic legitimacy and Machaquilá's right to polity status, and/or constitute an expression of the polity's stability in a time of regional socio-political turmoil.

The next and final K'uhul Ajaw of Machaquilá, Juun Tsak Took', was responsible for the production of four stelae, Stelae 8, 7, 6, and 5. His first commission, Stela 8 (9.19.15.13.0 [24 December 825], [Figure 7](#)), closely followed the works commissioned by his predecessor. Certain features of Stela 8 were more like Stela 3 than the intervening Stela 4, including the active pose, stressing the confident brandishing of the K'awiil scepter, and the presentation of additional inscriptions on the frame of the relief. These features were likely selected to stress Juun Tsak Took's legitimacy and power on his inaugural, accession stela. Stela 8 also further modified the formal qualities of the local visual discourse with its more slender figure and reduced detail. The subsequent Stela 7 (10.0.0.14.15 [2 January 831], [Figure 8](#) and [Figure 9](#)) continued this discourse, drawing formal and iconographic inspiration from preceding Machaquilá stelae, simplifying further the rendition of motifs, refining the figural proportions, and hieroglyphically associating the stela's consecration with multiple calendrical intervals. For the first time since Stela 2, the inscription of Stela 7 included a 'Captor of ...' title, possibly indicating a shift in the nature of regional political interaction that warranted explicit reference to Juun Tsak Took's regional power.

This possibility seems likely in light of the notable iconographic shifts that occurred on *Juun Tsak Took's* last two stelae, Stela 6 (10.0.5.16.0 [1 January 836], [Figure 10](#)) and Stela 5 (10.0.10.17.5 [30 December 840], [Figure 11](#)). Each of these sculptures omitted the *K'awiil* scepter, replaced the Water Lily Serpent headdress with an animal headdress, and substituted a new pectoral for the standard necklace. *Juun Tsak Took'* also donned a tubular nose ornament, which may have derived from the nose bar worn by the Water Lily Serpent on the masks of the preceding stelae.

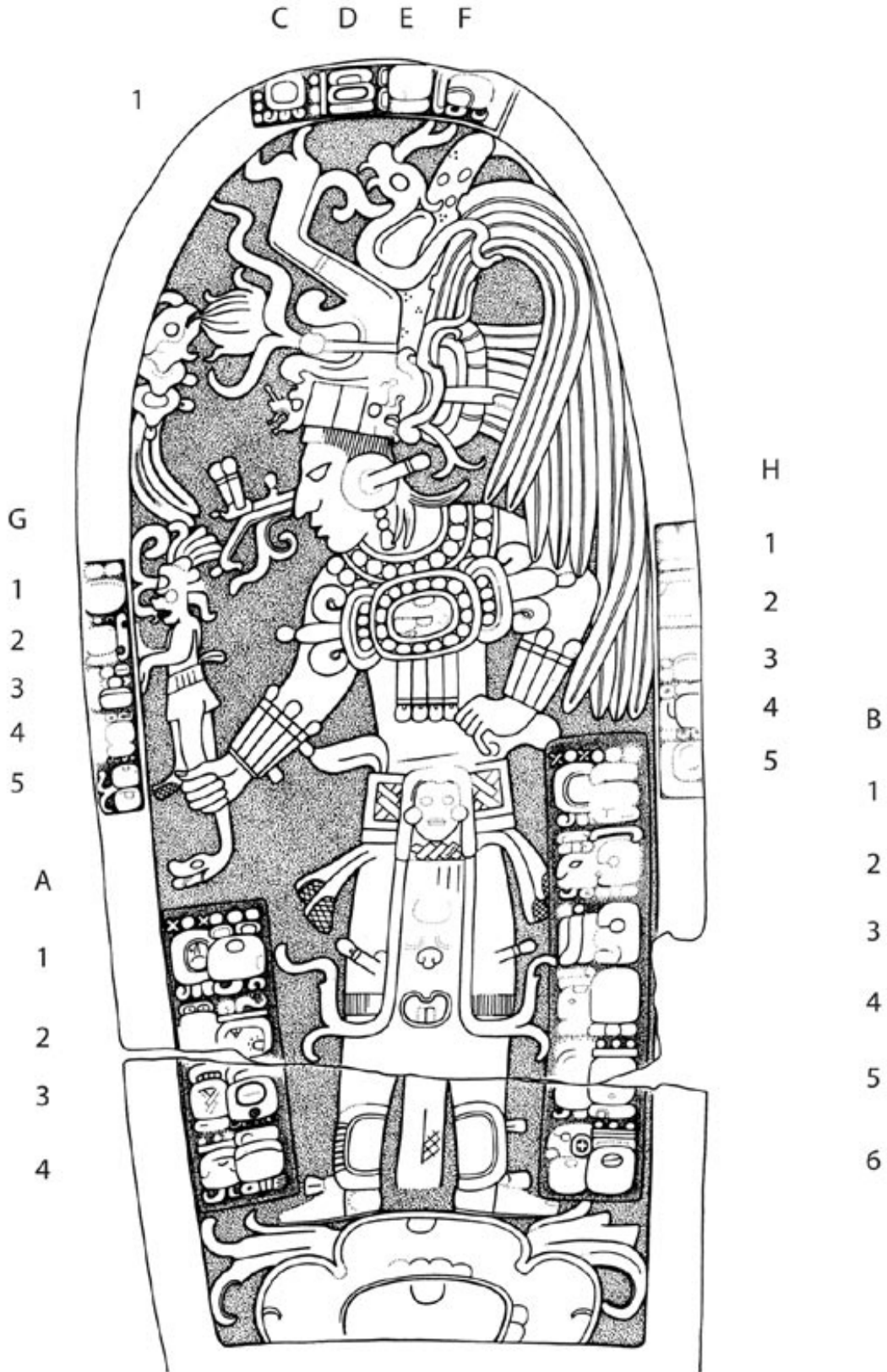


Figure 7. Machaquilá Stela 8. Drawing by Ian Graham, courtesy of Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.



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Figure 8. Machaquilá Stela 7. Author's photograph, courtesy of Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala.

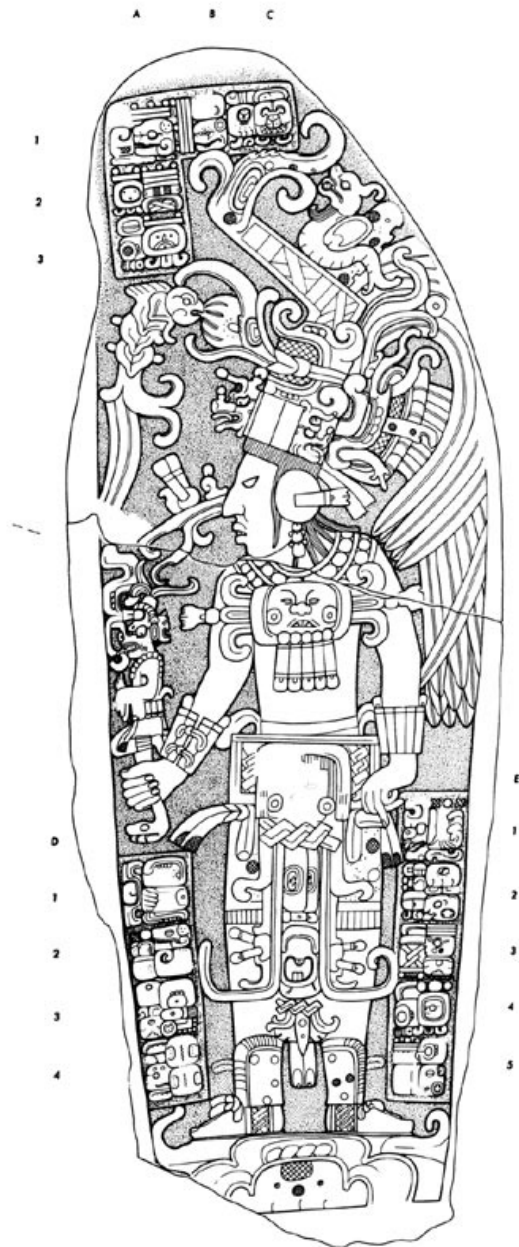


Figure 9. Machaquilá Stela 7. Drawing by Ian Graham, courtesy of Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

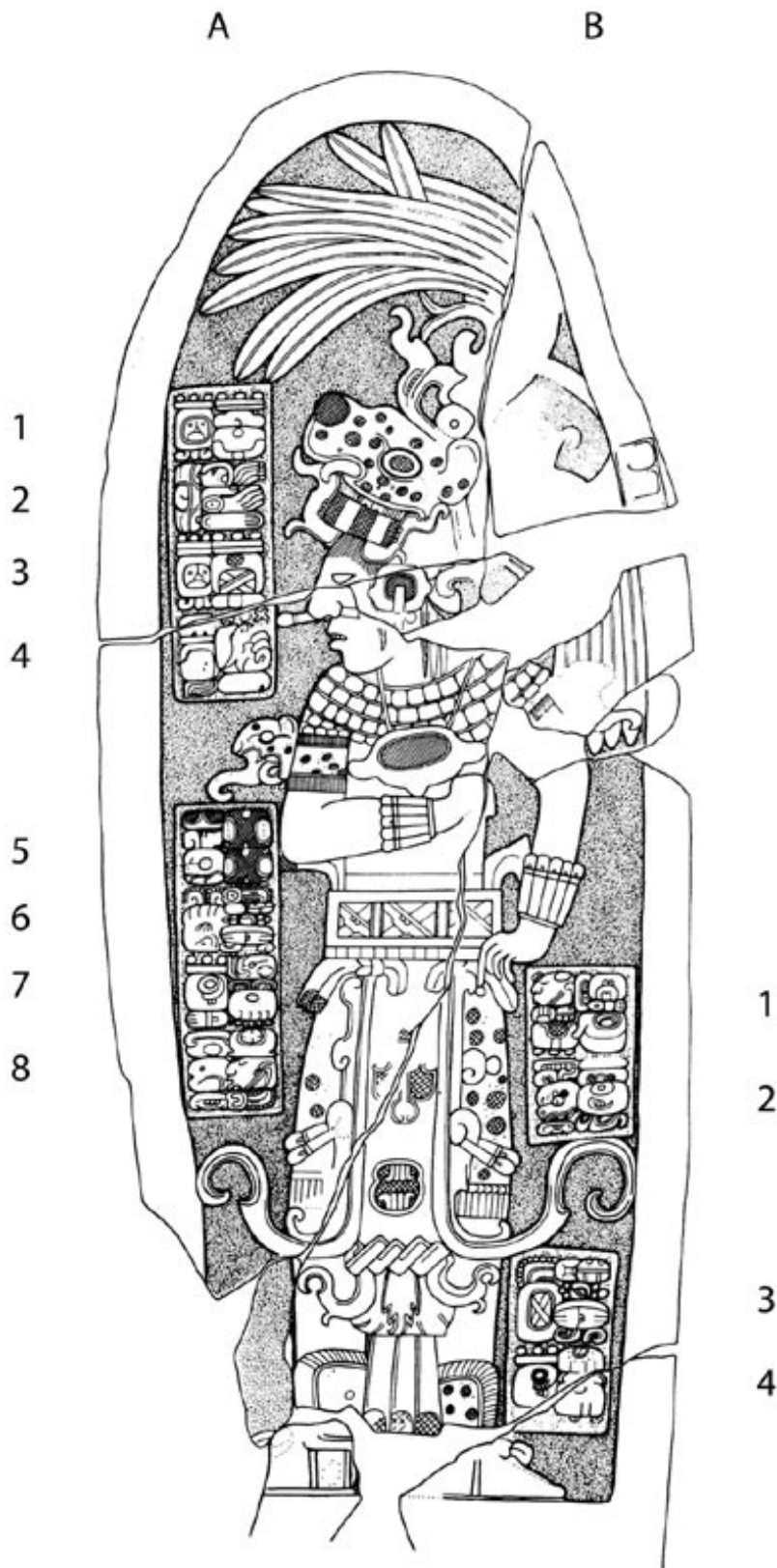


Figure 10. Machaquilá Stela 6. Drawing by Ian Graham, courtesy of Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

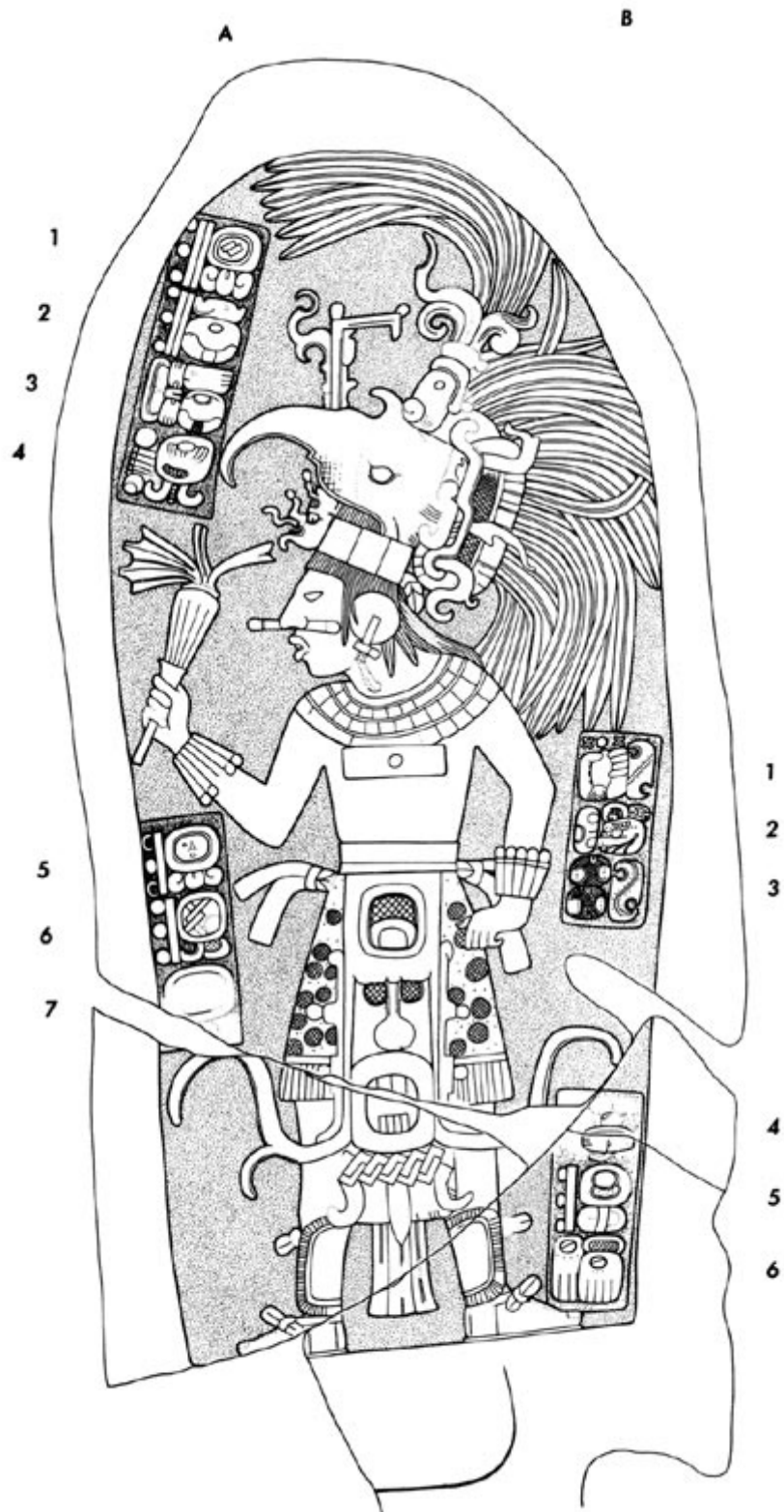


Figure 11. Machaquilá Stela 5. Drawing by Ian Graham, courtesy of Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

These motifs may have been new to Machaquilá's local visual discourse, but all of them find precedents in Southern Lowland Classic Maya art. Contrary to previous claims, *Juun Tsak Took's* gesture of 'reception' on Stela 6 is not submissive but dominant, and may reflect greater attention given to non-local audiences paralleling the 'updating' of the site's insular visual discourse with new iconography. At the same time, however, the artist incorporated these new ideas into the local visual discourse, as evidenced by the recurrence of various costume elements, the reference to the locally peculiar 1,820-/1,825-day intervals for the timing of the stela consecrations, and the continued adjustments made to human proportions and degree of detail (Figure 12). Ultimately, *Juun Tsak Took's* attempts to diversify and reconnect with regional politics failed, as the sculptural record at the site fell silent after the production of Stela 5.

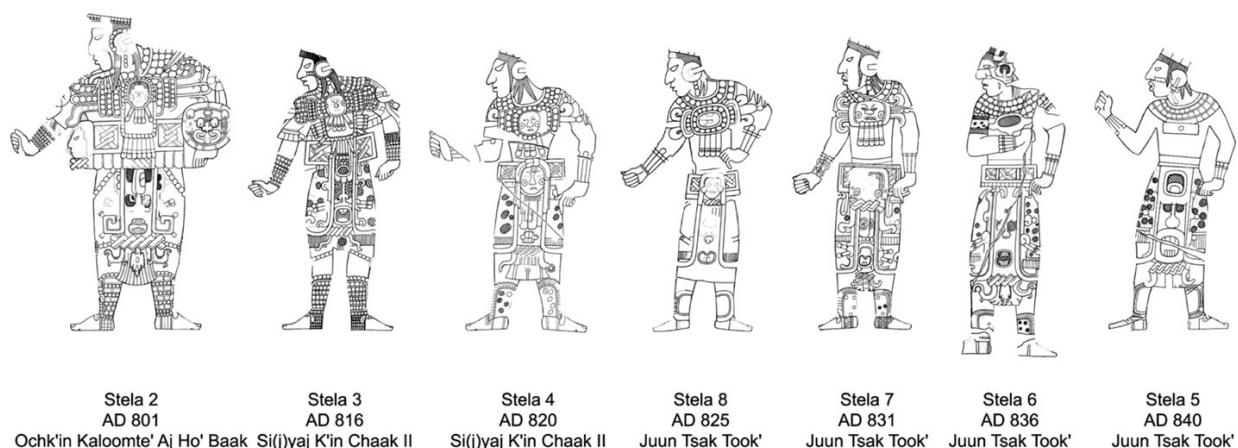


Figure 12. Comparison of figural proportions and pose, Machaquilá's ninth-century stelae, to scale, in chronological order from left to right. After drawings by Ian Graham, courtesy of Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

To review, the iconographic, hieroglyphic, and formal homogeneity among Machaquilá's ninth-century stelae, produced between A.D. 801 and A.D. 840, contrasted sharply with the variety of its early eighth-century stelae. The consistent ninth-century Machaquilá stela 'template' consisted of: (1) a formulaic hieroglyphic text associating each stela with multiple, alternative calendrical intervals; (2) portraits of rulers impersonating the Water Lily Serpent deity; (3) other normalized costume elements; and (4) the display of the *K'awiil* scepter. This 'template,' derived from Machaquilá's early corpus, first coalesced with Stela 18, erected in A.D. 775.

Following the demise of Dos Pilas, the primary capital of the Petexbatún *Mutal* polity, other sites in the region vied for political dominance. This power grab affected Machaquilá directly, as the polity fell prey to conquest by the Cancuén polity in the final years of the eighth century. Soon thereafter, however, *Ochk'in Kaloomte' Aj Ho' Baak*

reclaimed Machaquilá's political autonomy. His single stela commission, Stela 2 ([Figure 4](#)), incorporated several costume elements attested on stelae at Dos Pilas into the local compositional format, presenting the new ruler as comparable in status and power to the past *Mutal* kings.

Machaquilá's subsequent ruler, *Si(j)yaj K'in Chaak II*, commissioned two stelae, Stelae 3 ([Figure 5](#)) and 4 ([Figure 6](#)). Compared to Stela 2, they each drew more exclusively on local visual precedents, exhibited reduced detail in the rendering of motifs, depicted the ruler with a longer, leaner body, and, in their brief hieroglyphic inscriptions, focused more intently on period-ending and stela consecration rites. All of these qualities also characterized the first two stelae commissioned by Machaquilá's next and last known ruler, *Juun Tsak Took'*, namely Stelae 8 ([Figure 7](#)) and 7 ([Figure 8](#) and [Figure 9](#)). Although *Juun Tsak Took'*'s subsequent two stelae, Stelae 6 ([Figure 10](#)) and 5 ([Figure 11](#)), introduced new costume elements to the local 'template,' they reflect continued interest in the reduction of detail, lean human proportions, and the locally peculiar calendrical timing of consecration rites. Stelae 6 and 5 thus reflect not a foreign invasion of the site, as some scholars have argued, but the changing objectives of *Juun Tsak Took'* and/or his artists, together with a continuity of local visual idiosyncrasies and hieroglyphic rhetoric.

Both the uniformity of the late series and the regularity in kind of the changes made from one stela to the next at Machaquilá closely resemble traditional expectations of 'stylistic development.' The artists responsible for Machaquilá's seven ninth-century stelae, working within limited compositional and iconographic parameters, made subtle, formally consistent modifications to the design of each new work. The reduction of detail in the rendition of motifs, as exemplified by the renditions of the figures' pectorals ([Figure 13](#)), was limited to superfluous detail – the diagnostic features of the motifs remained and, in fact, became more legible. The reduction of detail also enhanced the visibility of the human form, drawing attention to the long, lean body. It is notable and, among Maya polities, exceptional that at Machaquilá the perceived artistic 'improvements' involved a consistent set of formal issues for forty years. From our distant and encompassing perspective, we may be tempted to explain Machaquilá's visual discourse as an inevitable 'stylistic development', which sequentially progressed 'toward' some singular goal of iconographic efficiency and perfect human proportions. However, as James Ackerman cautioned in his famous treatise on style, "what actually motivates the process is a constant incidence of probings into the unknown, not a sequence of steps toward the perfect solution."¹² Each successive stela at Machaquilá drew heavily on local precedent and its producers likely perceived in the relations among preceding works a pattern of formal modifications. It is unlikely, however, that Machaquilá's patrons and artists perceived some ultimate, perfect realization of this 'trajectory' yet chose instead to produce an intermediary, imperfect stage. Rather, each stela involved revisions to the local 'template' considered appropriate by its ruler-patron and artist.

¹² Ackerman 1963:175.

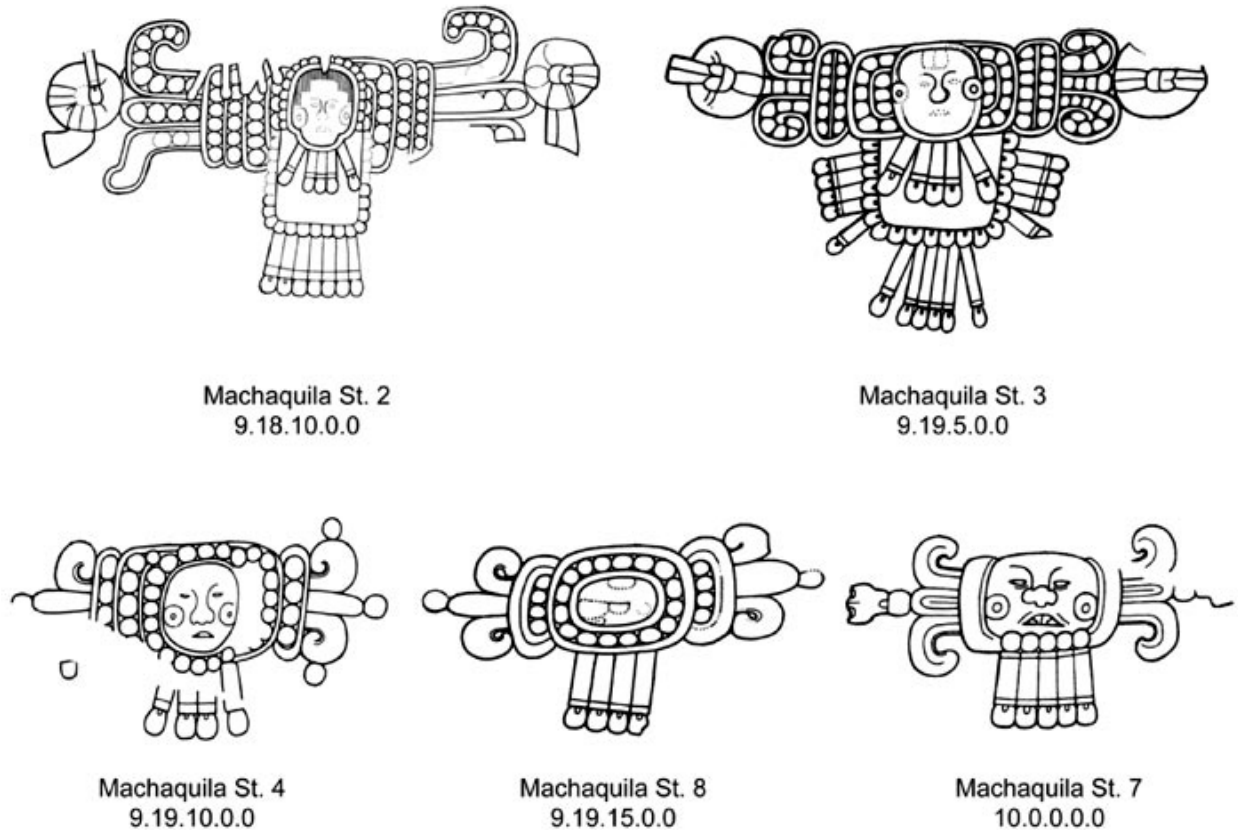


Figure 13. Variations in pectoral rendition on Machaquilá stelae. After drawings by Ian Graham, courtesy of Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

Seibal

Although there are significant affinities to Machaquilá's sculpture among Seibal sculptural corpus, Seibal's visual discourse is in many respects the antithesis of Machaquilá's. From the beginning of its ninth-century resurgence, Seibal's art was heterogeneous, looking outward for inspiration. Machaquilá's uniform, insular artistic program served the site for some forty years, but Seibal, with its eclectic ninth-century sculpture, dominated the Pasión river drainage in the latter half of the ninth century.

Seibal, located some 35 km to the north and west of Machaquilá, is the only other site in the Pasión region to have produced a substantial quantity of stelae in the ninth century ([Figure 1](#)). In contrast to the relatively secluded Machaquilá, Seibal's more accessible location in a region of modern economic interest led to its late nineteenth-century discovery and a century of study, including archaeological excavation. Seibal is at the crossroads of several major trade routes, connecting the highlands of Guatemala to the south to the Gulf coast of Tabasco via the Pasión and Usumacinta rivers, to the Central Maya Lowlands to the north, and to the eastern Southern Lowlands via the San Martín,

San Juan, and Mopán Rivers. Interaction with sites in all four cardinal directions is suggested by the art and hieroglyphic texts of Seibal, supporting its status as a primary node on this trade network in the second half of the ninth century. In the ninth century, Seibal was the westernmost major Maya city on the Pasi6n-Usumacinta trade artery. Its resurgence seems to be directly related to a broader socio-political interest in establishing a fixed boundary to the central Maya area, with Seibal serving as a western border city. The role of Seibal as a 'border town' between the lingering ninth-century Maya cities of the Southern Lowlands and the west strongly affected the site's stelae. Seibal's late sculptural heterogeneity reflects a strategy of accommodating the expectations of a diverse audience, likely of merchants, emissaries and/or other visitors from a variety of locations, while striving to maintain some notion of 'Maya' identity.

Throughout the site's long history of investigation, Seibal's ninth-century stelae have played a central role in discussions of potential foreign invasion of the Southern Maya Lowlands and in descriptions of the decay of the Classic Maya artistic tradition into 'decadence.' However, each of Seibal's stelae also incorporates specifically 'Maya' artistic and/or hieroglyphic conventions. The contemporaneous occurrence of both 'Classic Maya' and 'non-Classic' elements in Seibal's sculpture, often on a single stela, suggests a context of multiple 'systems' of conventions involved in the visual and hieroglyphic discourse of formal power displays.¹³ The diversity of Seibal's late corpus seems to indicate not invasion but a local willingness to adapt to the demands of a diverse and changing audience. Seibal's artistic heterogeneity constitutes a discursive strategy that contributed to the city's political success long after other sites in the region had fallen silent.

Archaeological data indicate that Seibal had a long history marked by two distinct peaks in population, construction activity, and related political power, separated by a virtual abandonment of the site that lasted some 200 years. During the Tepejilote Tepeu Phase (A.D. 600/650-770), a flourishing city emerged once again in the midst of Seibal's ancient remains. Seibal's population grew rapidly and substantially, perhaps reaching 8,000 inhabitants.¹⁴ During this era, the history and politics of Seibal are closely intertwined with those of the Mutal dynasty that ruled the Petexbat6n region, from Dos Pilas and Aguateca.¹⁵

Like Machaquil6, Seibal was one of the vying petty kingdoms that sought to proclaim regional authority after the decline of the *Mutal* polity, as evidenced by Seibal Stela 6/22 and a panel-pair designated as Stelae 5 and 7. These sculptures reveal strong affinities to other Petexbat6n sculpture and include explicit references to regional politics. During this era, Seibal's art was thoroughly involved in the visual trends and conventions of the greater Petexbat6n region.

¹³ The term 'system' herein refers not to some fixed, paradigmatic reality external to particular visual expressions, but the conceptualization of such a coherent structure held by the participants in visual discourses.

¹⁴ Sabloff 1975:234-237; Willey et al. 1975:41-42; Tourtellot 1988:411-427; Tourtellot 1990:127-133; Willey 1990:196-197, 247-256, 264.

¹⁵ For discussion of the history of the Petexbat6n Mutal polity, see Houston and Mathews (1985), Houston (1993), and Martin and Grube (2000).

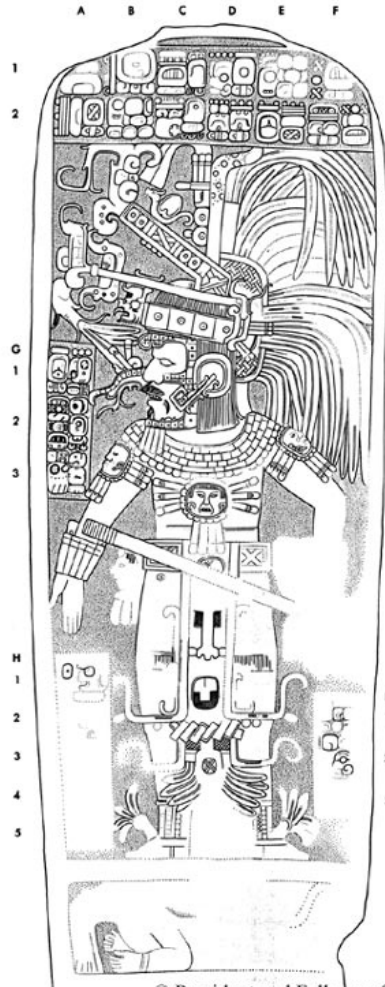
The production of these works is followed by almost fifty years of sculptural silence at Seibal. The same is true of virtually the entire lower Petexbatún region, with only Itzán, on the extreme western edge of the area, producing one sculpture, Stela 6, in A.D. 830.¹⁶ During this same period, Machaquilá enjoyed its late florescence, as all of its late stelae were produced between Seibal's Stelae 5 and 7 and the site's next commissioned sculptures, dating to A.D. 849.

Seibal under Aj Bolon Haabtal Wat'ul K'atel: the Structure A-3 program

Structure A-3, with its elaborate stucco façade and associated set of five stelae, was an impressively labor-intensive initial commission for Seibal's new ruler, *Aj Bolon Haabtal Wat'ul K'atel*. It includes nine portrayals of him, four large-scale, in-the-round stucco portraits above each of the structure's four doorways and one on each of five stelae (Stelae 8–11 and 21, [Figure 14](#), [Figure 15](#), [Figure 16](#), [Figure 17](#), and [Figure 18](#)). The associated inscriptions, and potentially the smaller-scale human figures flanking *Aj Bolon Haabtal Wat'ul K'atel's* stucco portraits, document that at least six emissaries came to Seibal to participate in the 10.1.0.0.0 (A.D. 849) period-ending ceremonies and, presumably, to endorse this new ruler's authority and membership in a regional political network. Four of these emissaries, namely those from Ucanal, Motul de San José, Calakmul, and *Lakamtuun*, bear titles consisting of a numerical coefficient and either Pet or Ek'. Two of these emissaries carry both titles. While these titles are not well understood, the people who used them in the Structure A-3 text seem to have served a central role in the re-establishment of Seibal as a full-fledged Maya polity with its own semi-divine lord.

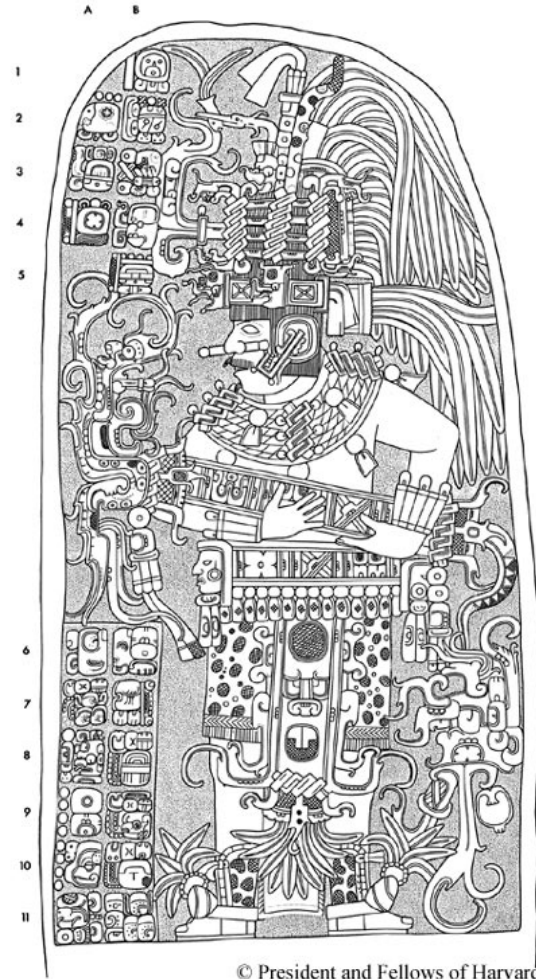
There seems to be a correlation between the cardinal directions Stelae 8–11 face and the places from which the emissaries documented on them came: Stela 11, facing east, records the visit of an Ucanal lord; Stela 10, facing north, documents the visit of lords from Tikal, Motul de San José, and Calakmul; Stela 9, facing west, notes the visit of a *Lakamtuun* lord; and Stela 8, facing south, documents a visitor from an unspecified 'Place of Reeds,' presumably to the south. This directional array of visitors, in conjunction with the radial form of Structure A-3, suggests that the program as a whole may have made physically manifest, on a small scale, the geopolitical situation of Seibal in relation to extant Maya political structure. Seibal was thus 'centered' within the political landscape. Stela 21 stands at the center atop the radial structure, in the midst of stelae that address polities in the four cardinal directions, specifically referencing the appropriate polities on each side.

¹⁶ Mathews and Willey 1991:46, 57.



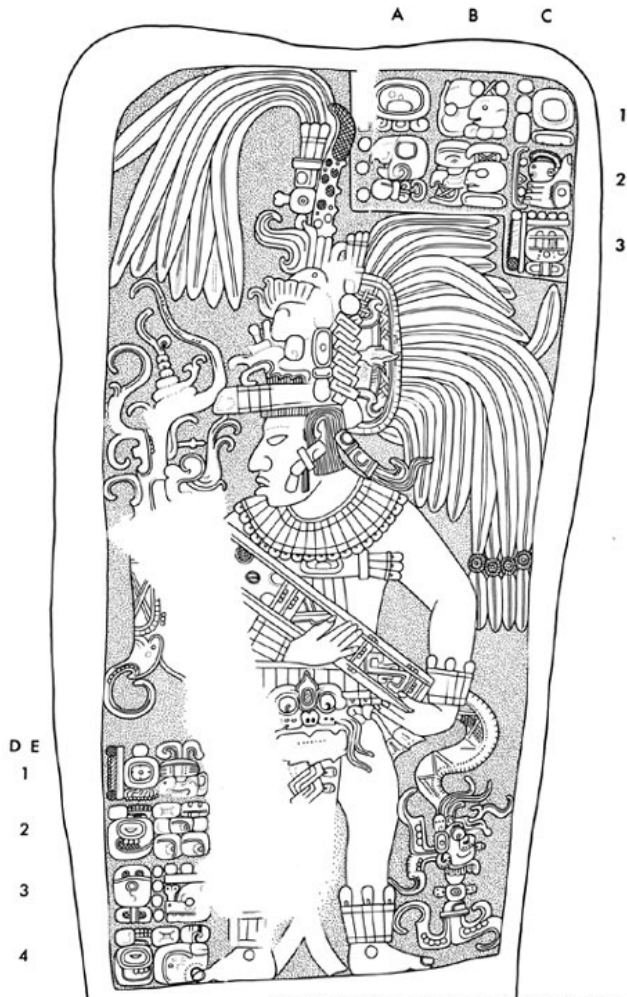
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Figure 14. Seibal Stela 11. Drawing, SBL: St. 11 by Ian Graham from Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Vol. 7, Part 1 © 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.



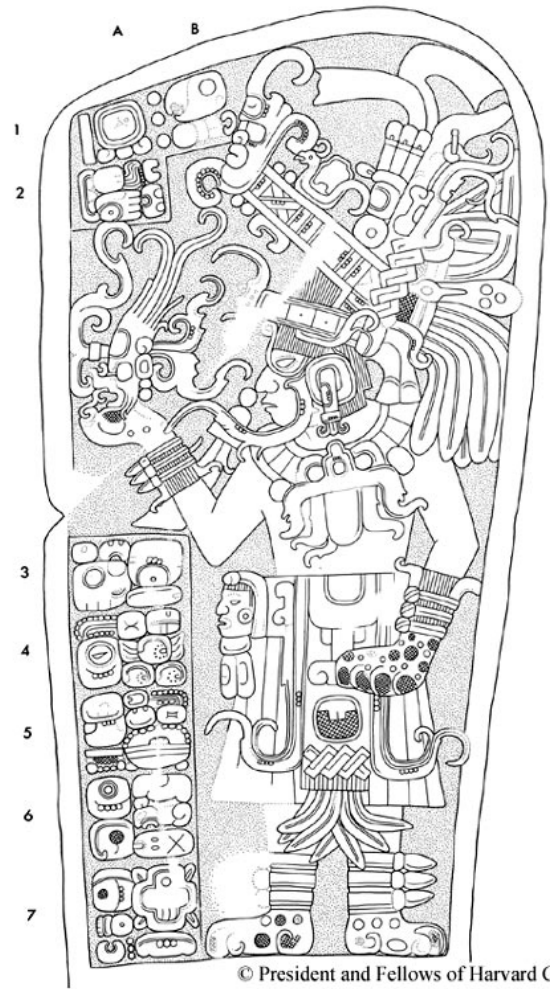
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Figure 15. Seibal Stela 10. Drawing, SBL: St. 10 by Ian Graham from Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Vol. 7, Part 1 © 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.



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Figure 16. Seibal Stela 9. Drawing, SBL: St. 9 by Ian Graham from Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Vol. 7, Part 1 © 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.



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Figure 17. Seibal Stela 8. Drawing, SBL: St. 8 by Ian Graham from Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Vol. 7, Part 1 © 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.



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Figure 18. Seibal Stela 21. Drawing, SBL: St. 21 by Ian Graham from *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions*, Vol. 7, Part 1 © 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Ucanal may have played a more substantial role than the other cited polities in Seibal's renewal, as Stela 11 documents that an Ucanal lord oversaw *Aj Bolon Haabtal Wat'ul K'atel's* arrival at Seibal some 21 years prior to the period-ending rites witnessed by the other visitors. Still, *Aj Bolon Haabtal Wat'ul K'atel* may have been a Seibal native who traveled to Ucanal for royal investiture ceremonies, subsequently 'arriving' back at Seibal as a *K'uhul Ajaw* endorsed by another *K'uhul Ajaw*.¹⁷ While the Structure A-3 stelae have some eastern affinities, they are not uniquely derivative of Ucanal's sculpture. Significantly, Ucanal's contemporaneous Stela 4 incorporates several features traditionally considered 'non-Classic,' such as square-cartouched glyphs, a floating figure, and an atlatl, all of which are absent from the Structure A-3 program. If reference to any sculptural corpus can be considered primary among the Structure A-3 stelae, it is that of Machaquilá. Given that Machaquilá had the latest sculptural program in the region and likely controlled east-west trade through the first half of the ninth century, it is not surprising that *Aj Bolon Haabtal* and his sculptors looked to that site's art for inspiration.¹⁸ However, the incorporated Machaquilá features derive from various stelae and are amalgamated with an array of innovations and references to the art of other regions. Further, the Structure A-3 stelae do not seem to reflect the overt interest in human proportions or reduction of superfluous detail evidenced in Machaquilá's late series. Instead of responding to the formal interests of Machaquilá's visual discourse, *Aj Bolon Haabtal* and his sculptors seem to have made reference to visual precedent at Machaquilá to generally facilitate the shift in regional political dominance from Machaquilá to Seibal.

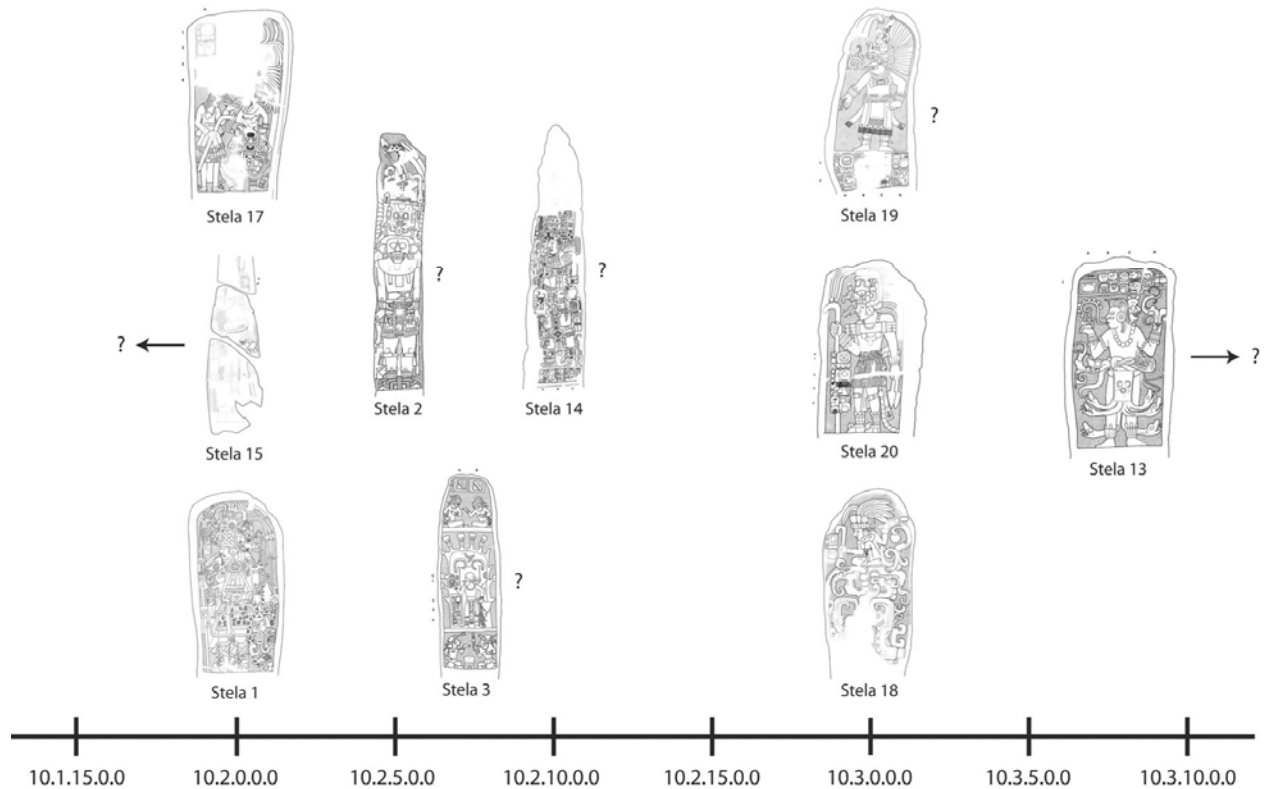
The diverse Structure A-3 stelae drew inspiration widely, while remaining well-grounded in thoroughly Maya visual discourse. The wide range of surface treatment, composition, and iconography implemented in Structure A-3 stelae presented *Aj Bolon Haabtal Wat'ul K'atel* as thoroughly 'Classic Maya,' encompassing many regional trends and mannerisms. Though Schele and Mathews proposed that the distinct period-ending rites depicted and documented on the Structure A-3 stelae record a ritual sequence of events, the lack of calendrical or temporal deictic sequencing in the texts – devices common in Late Classic inscriptions – suggest instead that the stelae more generally incorporate an array of typical, 'Classic Maya' period-ending rites.¹⁹ With his Structure A-3 stelae, *Aj Bolon Haabtal Wat'ul K'atel* seems to have sought to appease the visual expectations of a diverse audience of Maya lords, likely including the emissaries mentioned on them. In so doing, *Aj Bolon Haabtal Wat'ul K'atel* presented himself heterogeneously, without a coherent, unique visual identity. The diverse Structure A-3 stelae also lack formal unity. Although some of Seibal's subsequent sculptors seem to have drawn inspiration from this program, they took disparate formal qualities and iconographic elements and adapted them in distinct ways. The appropriative strategy of the Structure A-3 program, of appeasing a wide, heterogeneous audience's visual

¹⁷ His use of a title unique to the Petexbatún region, *Aj Bolon Haabtal*, may support the possibility that he had local heritage.

¹⁸ Proskouriakoff (1993:184) insightfully suspected that competition over trade routes resulted in the related demise of Machaquilá and resurgence of Seibal.

¹⁹ Schele and Mathews 1998:182-196.

expectations, characterizes Seibal's later ninth-century sculptures as well. As the intended audience became more diverse, however, Classic Maya conventions became merely one of multiple, competing communicative systems in a more eclectic visual discourse.



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Figure 19. Chronological arrangement of Seibal's late stelae. Drawings, SBL: St. 1, 2, 3, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, and 20 by Ian Graham from *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Vol. 7, Part 1* © 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Seibal's later ninth-century sculpture

Twelve Seibal stelae were erected after *Aj Bolon Haabtal's* Structure A-3 program. They resist strictly sequential stylistic analysis, as they vary dramatically in appearance and several cannot be securely dated. Additionally, their texts tend to be brief and opaque, providing scant information for chronological sequencing and only vague, titular references to the patron-rulers responsible for their production. Still, several overlapping threads of visual continuity and patterns of script degeneration suggest a plausible, yet admittedly provisional, chronological sequence for Seibal's late stelae (Figure 19). For the sake of brevity, four stelae have been selected for summary consideration in this

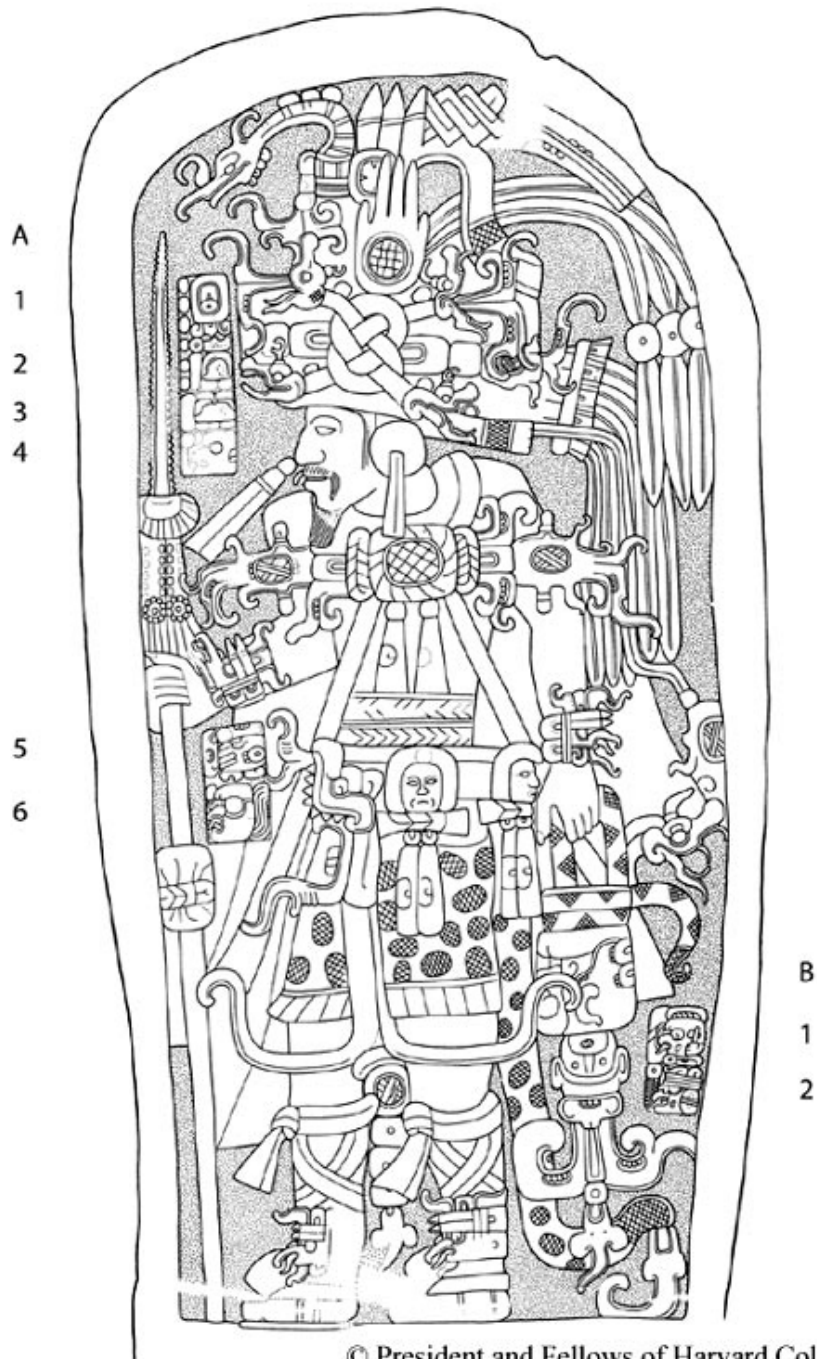
report: Stelae 1, 17, 3, and 13. In general, stelae produced around the 10.2.0.0.0 *k'atuun* ending in A.D. 869, such as Stelae 1 and Stela 17, incorporated novel formal conventions and iconographic elements in compositions with strong ties to preceding Southern Lowland art. By the next *k'atuun* ending, 10.3.0.0.0 (A.D. 889), Seibal's stelae, including Stela 3, exhibited less continuity with Southern Lowland traditions while more overtly referencing non-Classic visual precedents. The coordination of Classic and non-Classic motifs became particularly awkward in the latest Seibal stelae, as exemplified by Stela 13. Stela 13 provides the strongest indications that the conventions of Classic Maya visual communication, including both text and image, lost their semiotic salience at Seibal, likely paralleling a more general degeneration of the Classic Southern Lowland socio-political 'system.'

Stela 1

Stela 1 ([Figure 20](#)), as well as the compositionally similar Stelae 14 and 15, explored a three-quarters figural pose that finds several Southern Lowland precedents. The first of the three, Stela 15, presents a long, lean figural form with arms held tightly against the body likely to accord with the form of the stone, in what seems an attempt to present a three-quarters figural pose. The figure holds a shield and a spear, a pairing with strong Southern Lowland precedent. The artist of Stela 1 seems to have further developed the three-quarters pose of the figure from Stela 15 by presenting both legs (and feet) facing the viewer's left. Some of the novel aspects of the figure's costume and accoutrements, such as the knotted serpent headdress, derive from earlier sculptures at Seibal. Others, such as the rope pectoral, the jaguar tail on the rear of the hipcloth and the crossed-band gaiters seem to have been inspired by the art of other Southern Lowland Maya cities. The 'Knife-Wing' bird atop the headdress, on the other hand, seems to reflect some form of interaction with Chichén Itzá, or the two sites' mutual interaction with some other group.

In contrast to the proposal of Ringle and his colleagues that the individual on Stela 1 is from Chichén Itzá, the various sources of Stela 1's eclectic iconography instead suggest a continued interest in presenting a generally 'cosmopolitan' ruler.²⁰ The Seibal Emblem Glyph, which featured prominently in the inscriptions of the Structure A-3 stelae, erected twenty years earlier, is absent from Stela 1 and other late Seibal sculptures. Seibal's *K'awiil*//*GI* patron deity pair, however, continued to be referenced in text and image on later stelae.

²⁰ Ringle et al. 1998.



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Figure 20. Seibal Stela 1. Drawing, SBL: St. 1 by Ian Graham from *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions*, Vol. 7, Part 1 © 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Stela 17

Stela 17's ([Figure 21](#)) scene of interaction between distinctly rendered individuals has garnered much scholarly attention vis-à-vis theories of foreign presence at Seibal. The figures on Stela 17 epitomize John Graham's 'Facies A and B' figural dichotomy,

depicting, according to his assessment, the interaction of a traditionally 'Classic' Maya lord and a foreign, 'non-Classic' individual.²¹ Further, his interpretation of the gesture of the right figure as one of 'submission,' a reading subsequently adopted by Arlen Chase, supported theories of foreign invasion and takeover of Seibal by foreigners as an explicit image of the surrender of a Maya lord.²² However, the actual implications of the hand-across-chest gesture and the visual prominence given the 'Classic' figure suggest the reverse social hierarchy. David Stuart characterized the left figure as subordinate to the right, though he considered it equally likely that this figure was simply a distinctly dressed, Classic Maya individual of lower status as opposed to a foreigner.²³

However, this costume finds no parallels in depictions of second-tier nobility in Classic Maya Southern Lowland art. Given the breadth of qualities and elements in Seibal's late corpus without Southern Lowland precedent, the 'non-Classic' identification of this individual seems more plausible. Unlike other Seibal stelae that blend traditionally Classic Maya and 'non-Classic' elements in the rendition of single individuals, Stela 17 used such elements to distinguish its two figures. One is presented as thoroughly Classic Maya and the other not.

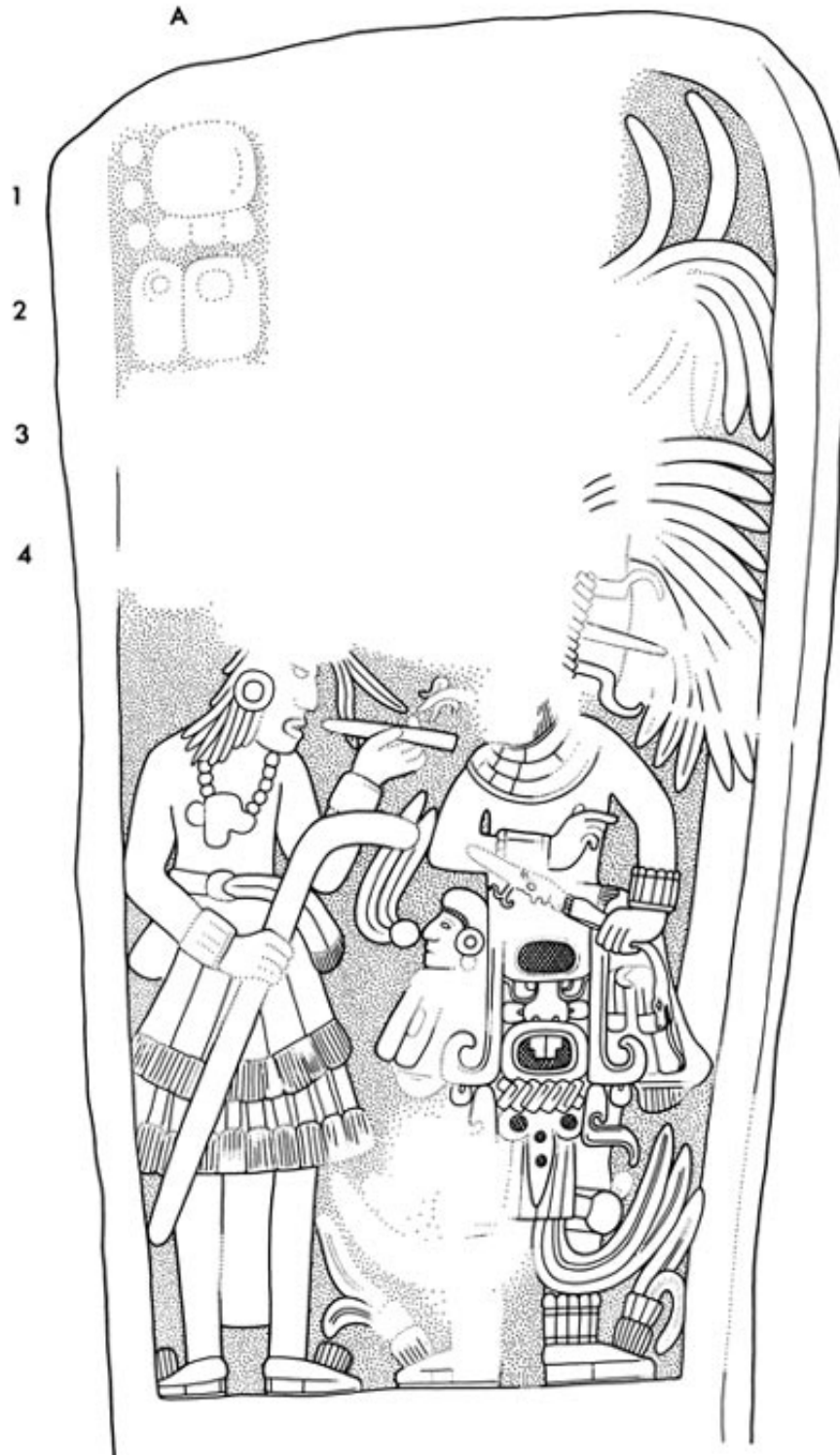
The 'non-Classic' figure cannot be associated with any specific culture group. The presence of a cigar may identify the figure as a merchant, in which case the curved implement may be a merchant's walking stick. The Classic Maya God L characteristically carries a walking stick and is also associated with tobacco.²⁴ In the Epiclassic (A.D. 800-1000) period, depictions of God L and, more generally, of merchants, appear with greater frequency throughout much of Mesoamerica. Given that Seibal was likely the westernmost 'Maya' node on an extensive trade network, interaction with non-Classic merchants was quite likely and may be the theme of Stela 17. Merchants may have served as the primary representatives at Seibal of the social groups from which they came. In general, the 'non-Classic' figure on Stela 17 and other Seibal sculptures suggests an interest among Seibal's artists and/or patrons in current visual trends outside the Southern Lowlands, with particular affinities to the art of the Northern Lowlands and possibly the Pacific piedmont region of Southern Guatemala. Such non-Classic features, however, were incorporated in sculptures that consistently maintained strong links to the Southern Lowland, Classic Maya tradition. In this sense, the 10.2.0.0 stelae at Seibal share the Structure A-3 program's incorporative tendency, although the inspiration for the adopted features was geographically and culturally more encompassing, including both Southern Lowland and more distant, 'non-Classic' references.

²¹ J. Graham 1973:215-216.

²² Graham 1971:147-148; Greene et al. 1972:240; J. Graham 1973:215; Chase 1985:108. Graham (1990:71) subsequently modified his reading to a "gesture of peace and friendship."

²³ Stuart 1993:337.

²⁴ Miller and Taube 1993:112, 147, 169. Alternatively, cigars are sometimes used in Classic Maya art to indicate that the depicted event occurred at night (Stephen Houston, personal communication via email, June 14, 2005).

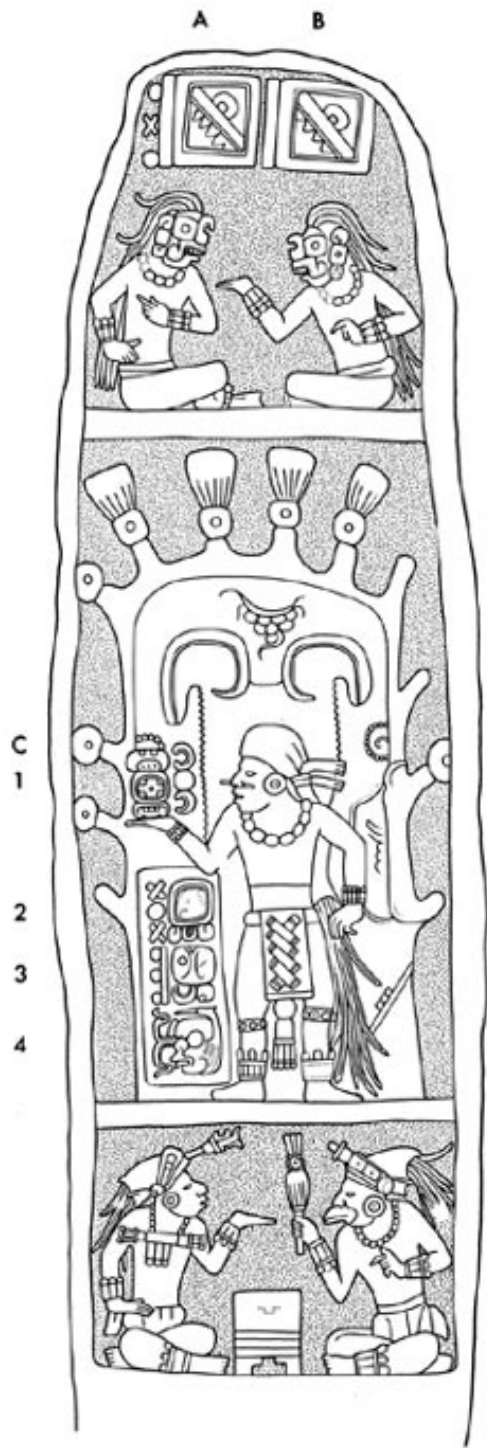


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Figure 21. Seibal Stela 17. Drawing, SBL: St. 17 by Ian Graham from *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions*, Vol. 7, Part 1 © 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Stela 3

Stela 3 ([Figure 22](#)) diverges more than any other Seibal sculpture from Southern Lowland visual norms. The panel composition of Stela 3, likely erected several years prior to the 10.3.0.0.0 period-ending, is more akin to the stelae of Oxk'intok in the Northern Lowlands than to any Southern Lowland sculpture. It also incorporates non-Classic square-cartouched glyphs and Tlaloc iconography. However, numerous other details of the carving, which accord with the earlier sculpture of Seibal as well as the reference to Seibal's patron deity-pair at the end of the brief hieroglyphic inscription, suggest that local precedent was not completely denied in the production of Stela 3. At the same time, the lack of any scrollwork and resultant large expanses of negative space, the novel panel composition, and the relatively crude textual presentation suggest expressing membership among 'Maya' polities was not a primary objective of the commission. Nor was the presentation of a specific, dominant *K'uhul Ajaw*, as there is no mention of the ruler-patron in the text. Instead, it seems as if the patron and sculptor of Stela 3 strove to present an exotic image, adding to the 'cosmopolitan' character of Seibal's sculptural corpus. This may have been done to address a 'non-Classic' audience through conventions of their visual discourse, and/or to display to Maya visitors the extensive, 'international' connections of Seibal's king.



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Figure 22. Seibal Stela 3. Drawing, SBL: St. 3 by Ian Graham from *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions*, Vol. 7, Part 1 © 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Stela 13

Although it cannot be dated specifically, Stela 13 ([Figure 23](#) and [Figure 24](#)) was likely the last known stela erected at Seibal. The stela presents a single figure, clad only in simply jewelry, a serpent belt, and a loincloth from which additional serpents emerge. As John Graham proposed, these serpents may be literal, naturalistic renditions of the stylized serpent apron frets common to Southern Lowland iconography.²⁵ As literal 'translations' of conventionalized Maya motifs, they are similar to the knotted serpents of the headdress on Stela 1 ([Figure 20](#)). The serpents are rendered distinctly from that sculpture, however. Some scholars have drawn comparison between the serpents on Stela 13 and sculptures from the Northern Lowlands.²⁶ However, their rendition at Seibal is distinct and serpent clothing elements are depicted in other places as well, such as at Bilbao on the Pacific piedmont of Guatemala.²⁷ A sinuous scroll, adorned with circular elements, extends from his mouth. This same 'speech scroll' also appears on Seibal Stela 19.

The figure's left hand is replaced by another set of elaborate scrolls emanating from a rectangular base. Although fairly rare in Maya art, there are precedents for depictions of humanoid figures with severed arms or hands. Karl Taube noticed that a human figure, likely the hero twin 1 *Ajaw*, is depicted with his arm severed on the Protoclassic Izapa Stela 25.²⁸ In the sixteenth-century Quiché Maya manuscript the *Popol Vuh*, 1 *Ajaw* (*Junajpu* in colonial Quiché) and his brother *Xbalanke* tried to forcibly humble the arrogant, bejeweled avian deity *Wuqub Kaqix* – *Wuqub Kaqix* bit off 1 *Ajaw*'s arm in the process.²⁹

Based particularly on the presence of the sinuous scrolls, Proskouriakoff thought that the sculptor of Stela 13 must have been "schooled in the Classic Maya tradition of draftsmanship."³⁰ These scrolls, however, stand out among the otherwise novel treatments of the figure and costume elements, suggesting that the scrollwork may have been added specifically to give the work an air of 'Classic Maya' tradition. It is notable in this respect that the 'Classic' scrolls are implemented to depict the key component of a Classic Maya theme, namely the severed arm. The character of the largely undecipherable hieroglyphic text above lends some support to the possibility that some elements of Stela 13 served as tokens of Classic Maya conventions.

²⁵ Graham 1990:65.

²⁶ Chase 1985:108; Graham 1990:64.

²⁷ Lee Parsons (1969:185) was the first to note the formal parallels between the sculpture of Bilbao and Seibal's Stelae 13 and 19. Although he noted the possibility that the similarities resulted from direct interaction between the two culture groups, he argued that they were more likely unrelated parallel developments deriving from earlier Teotihuacán influence (*ibid.*).

²⁸ Taube 1993:66. 1 *Ajaw* also seems to be missing his left hand in a Late Classic stucco frieze at Toniná, where the accompanying hieroglyphic caption explicitly states that 'his hand was chopped' (CHAK-k(i)-AJ / u-K'AB).

Christenson 2004:42, lines 1015-1016.

²⁹ Christenson 2004:42, lines 1015-1016.

³⁰ Proskouriakoff 1993:191.



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Figure 23. Seibal Stela 13. Photo, SBL: St. 13 by Ian Graham from Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Vol. 7, Part 1 © 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.



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Figure 24. Seibal Stela 13. Drawing, SBL: St. 13 by Ian Graham from Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Vol. 7, Part 1 © 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

The text opens with the second example at Seibal of a square-cartouched calendrical glyph. In contrast to the stylized *Cipactli* motif of the square glyphs on Stela 3, however, the glyph on Stela 13 consists of a rather naturalistically rendered, wide-lipped jar. As with the *Cipactli* glyphs, there is no known clear analog to the 'pot' glyph, and its relation to Maya calendars or any other Mesoamerican calendar is unknown.³¹ Moreover, given the lack of an accompanying 365-day calendar date, this presumably *tsolk'in*-like date would have recurred every 260 days, allowing for a great variety of potential correlations.³² The 'seven' coefficient above this glyph is positioned slightly off-center of the main sign, apparently to ensure its full presentation on the carved surface. The

³¹. Graham (1990:64), citing an unpublished article by J. Eric S. Thompson (1974), suggested that it may relate to the Veracruz or Tabasco variant of *atl* ('water')

³² Houston n.d.:14.

following glyphs do not yield to decipherment. Blocks B1 and C1 present a string of syllabic signs reading 't'u?-pu?-?-?-ba / e-je?-ke-ni-ta.'³³ Stephen Houston considered this string the most extreme example of the increasing ineptitude of Seibal's scribes, thus proposing a very late date for the sculpture, possibly in the early tenth century.³⁴ Contrastively, the final glyph block presents a perfectly constructed, mixed logographic-syllabic rendition of the *Ochk'in Kaloomte'* (west overlord/warrior) title, which was likely an explicit copy of the same collocation on Machaquilá Stela 3 ([Figure 5](#)).³⁵

Houston's insightful observations raise the question – why were presumably nonsensical Maya glyphs even included on Stela 13? As suggested for Stela 13's scrollwork, the inscriptions may have been included to make the sculpture look 'Classic Maya.' The use of syllabic elements in particular, as well as their distinctly rounded forms, stand in maximal contrast to the logographic or pictographic, non-Classic square-cartouched glyph. It may not be coincidental that while the initial calendrical glyph is modified to appear fully within the relief surface, the *Ochk'in Kaloomte'* title is overlapped by the outer frame. This subtle difference in presentation may reflect relative social and communicative value given the non-Classic and 'Classic Maya' glyphs. Such a rationale for the inclusion of the 'Classic Maya' portion of the hieroglyphic inscription implies a drastic shift in the semiotic function of the glyphs. Instead of transparently conveying historical information to literate Maya, they may have suggested 'Mayaness' to an illiterate, presumably 'non-Classic' audience. Further, they serve a semiotic function of characterizing the non-Classic initial glyph as 'non-Classic.' The scrollwork included in the imagery may serve a comparable role. It is not implemented on Stela 13 to enliven negative space or balance visual activity as it did in late eighth- and early ninth-century Southern Lowland sculpture. Instead it seems to appear as a *token* of 'Classic Maya' visual discourse.

Traditional Classic Maya features, such as scrollwork and syllabic writing, seem to have been incorporated primarily to contrast the dominant non-Classic features. During this late sequence, then, Classic Maya conventions of visual discourse played a gradually shifting role, first serving as the primary framework into which non-Classic references were incorporated, but ultimately becoming tokens of a virtually 'defunct' communicative system. The ultimate step in this process was likely the discontinuation of stela erection.

Overview of Seibal's sculptural corpus

In contrast to the uniformity of Machaquilá's late stelae, Seibal's stelae are heterogeneous, with little formal or iconographic coherence. In fact, the only pervasive characteristic of Seibal's visual discourse is its diversity. The first sculptures of Seibal's late eighth-century florescence reflect close interaction with, and strong visual inspiration from, the Petexbatún region. Seibal's Hieroglyphic Stairway, likely produced under the direction of the *K'uhul Ajaw* of Dos Pilas, *Bajlaj Chan K'awiil*, was a format

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

common in the Petexbatún region and its inscriptions explicitly documented Seibal's subordinate relation to the *Mutal* polity. After the demise of Dos Pilas, Seibal's new ruler, *Ajaw Bot*, continued to focus primarily on social interaction with the Petexbatún polities, apparently noting on his Stela 6/22 some form of alliance with the Tamarindito/Arroyo de Piedra polity and implementing the popular Petexbatún panel format and ballplayer theme for the site's first figural reliefs, Stelae 5 and 7. *Ajaw Bot*'s attempts to claim regional dominance seem to have failed, however, as a fifty-year hiatus in sculptural production at Seibal ensued. Throughout this era, Seibal's ruler-patrons and artists adopted aspects of Petexbatún visual discourse to present their polity as a political entity like in kind to the *Mutal* polity.

Aj Bolon Haabtal Wat'ul K'atel's ambitious A.D. 849 commission of Structure A-3 and its five associated stelae ([Figure 14](#), [Figure 15](#), [Figure 16](#), [Figure 17](#), and [Figure 18](#)) marked Seibal's return to sculptural production. By incorporating hieroglyphic references to visitors from polities representing the four cardinal directions, the Structure A-3 program served to 'center' Seibal within the Southern Lowland Maya political landscape. *Aj Bolon Haabtal Wat'ul K'atel*'s Structure A-3 stelae also incorporated a wide range of conventional, Classic Maya period-ending rituals and imagery. Together, they presented the new king as a thoroughly Classic Maya, legitimate ruler, yet without formal or thematic coherence. Although the Structure A-3 program successfully situated the Seibal polity in the Southern Lowland Maya political landscape, it did not provide *Aj Bolon Haabtal Wat'ul K'atel* a distinctive identity and did not establish a local visual 'template' for the city's subsequent stelae.

Seibal's later rulers and artists drew visual inspiration even more broadly, integrating in their stelae highly varied iconography, calendrical glyphs, and formal conventions from beyond the Southern Maya Lowlands ([Figure 19](#)). These non-Classic features did not derive from a single cultural interlocutor or 'invader.' Instead, Seibal's patrons and artists expanded the scope of their acceptable visual 'paradigm' to accommodate and acknowledge the visual expectations of an increasingly more diverse, 'international' audience. At the same time, the use and function of some Classic Maya conventions changed: (1) the depicted rulers became anonymous, lacking hieroglyphic name captions; (2) the stelae were less consistently associated with *k'atuun*-based period endings; and (3) both text and imagery indicate a decline in the communicative dominance of Classic Maya visual and hieroglyphic conventions. Classic Maya communicative norms became one of several options for visual expression, gradually losing their central position in the visual discourse.

The variety of non-Classic references and their integration with Classic Maya features on Seibal's late stelae contradict past proposals that a foreign group invaded Seibal. In part, these proposals were rooted in the problematic notion of 'influence.' As Michael Baxandall keenly argued, conceptualizing similarities among works of art as 'influence' wrongly grants agency to the precedent instead of the subsequent, responding work and its producer(s).³⁶ At Seibal, non-Classic elements were actively selected for incorporation, not passively 'received' from invading foreigners. The visual discourse at

³⁶ Baxandall 1985:58-60.

Seibal never fully integrated its wide-ranging references, however. In fact, the differences among alternate visual 'systems' was at times exaggerated, as exemplified by the use of highly rounded, purely phonetic Classic Maya hieroglyphs to contrast a logographic or pictographic, square, non-Classic glyph on Seibal Stela 13 ([Figure 23](#) and [Figure 24](#)). At Seibal, artists and patrons actively made heterogeneity the single most unifying feature of the city's ninth-century visual discourse.

Visual discourse and socio-historical explanation

The dissertation summarized by this report considered the stela programs of Machaquilá and Seibal via analogy to linguistic discourse in part to avoid some of the pitfalls of traditional art historical stylistic analysis. For example, a stylistic analysis may have described the formal patterns among Machaquilá's late stela as a 'developmental trajectory' with its own inherent 'inertia,' inevitably leading toward subsequent productions. In contrast, the discourse-based study presented herein stressed the agentive role of Machaquilá's artists and patrons in the sequential modification of the city's stela 'template.' Alternatively, a stylistic analysis may have considered the presence of non-Classic features in the stela of Seibal the 'influence' of foreign groups who actively affected the city's art. Again, by stressing the agency of the local producers of these stela, the visual discourse analysis of this study demonstrated that the non-Classic visual devices were not imposed but selected. What remains to be addressed is whether, and, if so, how, 'visual discourses' can be *explained*; that is, how they relate to the broader social and historical contexts of their production and reception.

The geopolitical situation of both Machaquilá and Seibal seem to have affected the visual discourses of their stela. Machaquilá's insular, conservative stela compositions and the obsession with a peculiar calendrical patterning could be seen to parallel the site's geopolitical isolation. Machaquilá is nestled in rough terrain, away from other contemporaneous political powers. Additionally, assuming the dry Machaquilá riverbed was used as a trade route, the city's conservative stela likely served as a visual expression of political stability and, by extension, security of the trade route in the midst of political turmoil following the fall of the *Mutal* polity.

Seibal, located at the crossroads of several major trade routes, likely attained its late ninth-century success in part from managing economic exchange among various regions. The visitors from other polities that oversaw *Aj Bolon Haabtal Wat'ul K'atel's* arrival, accession, and first period-ending ceremonies presumably had a vested interest in establishing a strong polity at this trade-route nexus to serve as a 'buffer' for interaction with non-Classic peoples. Seibal's diverse, heterogeneous late stela, as well as the possible depictions of merchants on Stela 17 ([Figure 21](#)) and other sculptures (e.g. Stela 20), thus could relate directly to Seibal's geopolitical location at the nexus of wide-reaching trade networks.

Considering further the potential role of mercantilism leads to other possible explanations of each site's ninth-century visual discourses. In his treatise on fifteenth-

century Italian painting, Michael Baxandall described how the mathematical skills essential to merchants, such as gauging and proportions, were deeply involved in the art of the time.³⁷ Since trade-route maintenance was likely central to the political successes of ninth-century Machaquilá and Seibal, perhaps the nature of their art was related and could be explained in a manner analogous to Baxandall's discussion of fifteenth-century Italian painting. Throughout Mesoamerica, certain mathematical concepts were fundamental to economic exchange – market days were scheduled according to different calendars in different towns, and trade items likely had to be measured and valued according to varying local conventions. Perhaps the alternate period endings used at Machaquilá for stela consecration ceremonies were scheduled to fall on 1 *Ajaw* or 13 *Kum'ku* market days, when more people would be present in the city's ceremonial center to witness the ruler's display of power and authority. Perhaps the interest in figural proportions evident in Machaquilá's stelae also appealed particularly to mercantile-minded rulers and visitors. At Seibal too, the incorporation of mercantile iconography such as walking sticks and the use of non-Classic calendrical systems may have been directed toward the visual and mathematical 'cultural equipment' of merchants.

Baxandall provided another observation of fifteenth-century Italian painting with potential explanatory value for the visual discourses of ninth-century Machaquilá and Seibal. In explaining the changes evident in painting contracts, Baxandall noted a "selective inhibition about display," that is, an aesthetic of humility or reserve, as a general tendency in Western Europe in the latter half of the fifteenth century.³⁸ Perhaps a similar "fashion," with similarly "elusive moral overtones," occurred in the Southern Maya Lowlands in the ninth century.³⁹ In the eighth century, opulence and corpulence were common features of *K'uhul Ajaw* portraits, serving as visual signs of kings' access to goods, lives of leisure, and, by extension, political power. At Machaquilá, the reduction of detail in costume elements and the change in figural proportions toward a more svelte portrayal of the *K'uhul Ajaw* may reflect a selective inhibition about display analogous to that described by Baxandall. At Seibal, the people portrayed on stelae were presented without the royal titles so common in the Classic period. In several cases, they are not even named. In addition, the portrayal of a single figure dressed in non-royal garb on Seibal Stela 20 may indicate a growing taste for humility. Perhaps the extreme economic disparity between the expanding elite class and the commoners in the eighth-century Southern Maya Lowlands resulted in a reactionary ninth-century elite aesthetic of reserve. In this sense, the preceding, eighth-century stelae characterized by Tatiana Proskouriakoff as 'Ornate' and 'Dynamic,' with their extreme elaboration of motifs and long lists of elite titles, might be more accurately conceptualized as 'decadent,' that is, as excessively sophisticated, in the eyes of ninth-century Maya.⁴⁰ In contrast, the late stelae of Machaquilá and Seibal, traditionally classified as 'decadent,' could be seen to involve selective inhibitions about display as a visual remedy to potential social schism resulting from the elite excesses of the eighth-century past.

³⁷ Baxandall 1988:86-108.

³⁸ *Ibid.*:14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Proskouriakoff 1950.

This sampling of possible explanations is by no means exhaustive, nor is it intended to claim any of these interpretations are definitively correct. Instead, analogy to Michael Baxandall's insightful explanations of fifteenth-century Italian painting highlight the limitations of developing such social explanations for the visual discourses of ancient Maya visual culture. The social history of art is an enticing approach from which to relate visual discourse to non-visual social phenomena, and has proven effective and enlightening when supplementary evidence is available to support its social explanations. For the ancient Maya, we have no contracts, no letters describing patrons' reactions to different artists' works, no textbooks of mercantile mathematics. We also lack a large proportion of ancient Maya visual culture; works of paper, wood, and other organic or water-soluble materials quickly deteriorate in the tropical climate of the Southern Maya Lowlands. The data provided by archaeology, although rich and informative, is of a different temporal scale than the discursive practices of artistic production. Further, archaeological scholarship suffers the same limitations as art historical analysis in its inability to retrieve with certainty or specificity the thoughts and intentions of people from the artifacts they produced and used. Without supplementary evidence and a broader corpus of visual culture, we cannot corroborate social explanations such as those suggested herein. A range of causal relations can obtain among a social group and their visual expressions – without corroborating historical evidence it is not possible to know which relations were actually involved in visual discourse. Still, the archaeological excavations currently underway at Machaquilá and planned for Seibal may recover unexpected supplementary sources that could support or disprove specific explanations of these polity's ninth-century visual discourses. While the discourse analyses presented herein can rule out some scenarios, such as foreign invasion, they require corroborating evidence before we can select among the possible alternative explanations they suggest.

Visual discourse participants: artist, patron, audience

Discourse analysis has informed linguistics not only by drawing attention to the socio-historical contingency of verbal interaction, but also by opening to investigation the ways interlocutors' experiences and expectations condition their language use. Visual discourse analysis analogously involves the roles of the participants in artistic production and reception. However, unlike mundane verbal interaction, in which participants play both expressive and receptive roles and can continuously adjust their speech to their context and audience, visual discourse involves three distinct, non-shifting categories of participant, namely artist, patron, and audience. There is also more at stake in the visual discourses of stone sculpture than in mundane linguistic exchanges; they are labor-intensive, permanent, public expressions. A distinct relation between visual expressions and the participants in their production and reception derives from these qualities. Once made, visual culture can exist in continuously changing social contexts, the changing social roles of artists and patrons can continue affect and refine the way the expression is understood, and the actual viewers of the work may be distinct from those the producers envisioned. Because visual expressions are less intrinsically tied to their interlocutors than in spoken interaction, the relative

roles and social implications of the participants in visual discourses are more complex, dynamic, and, for the analyst, more difficult to discern.

It seems certain that ninth-century artists and patrons at Machaquilá and Seibal collaborated in the design of stelae, involving in the process their goals and expectations vis-à-vis the audiences they anticipated, their perceptions of their social roles, and their desires to represent and visually define themselves in a certain way. However, the same limitations noted for more general socio-historical explanation restrict our ability to discern the particular contributions of each participant in the production of the stelae under investigation. Thus, although the visual discourse approach posits questions regarding the relative roles played by the participants, answers require corroborating evidence that is unavailable for the ninth-century stela programs of Machaquilá and Seibal. For example, did Machaquilá's ruler-patrons request to be portrayed with long, lean bodies, or were such formal concerns left to the discretion of the artists? Did the artists and/or patrons at Seibal discuss with non-Classic visitors what references they should include in their stelae? Were the multiple Seibal stelae produced for the 10.2.0.0 and 10.3.0.0 period endings commissioned and/or carved by the same or different people? Were the problematic inscriptions on some Seibal stelae the product of non-Classic artists brought in to the site to produce sculptures in the manner of their home culture? How accurately did the artists and patrons conceptualize their audiences? Did the audiences respond in the manner they intended? The lack of data about ancient Maya artist-patron interactions, the process of commissioning and creating a sculpture, and the reactions viewers had to stelae severely limit our ability to address these important questions. Thus, although the visual discourse approach highlights such issues, the nature of ancient Maya historical documentation restricts our ability to provide answers.

Directions for future investigation

In lieu of offering definitive socio-historical explanations or descriptions of the interactions among artists, patrons, and audiences, the present study of the visual discourses of Machaquilá's and Seibal's ninth-century stelae poses a range of possible interpretations and questions that merit further consideration. As suggested by the numerous references to sculptural precedents both within and beyond the Southern Maya Lowlands, comparable close analysis of contemporaneous sculpture at these locations could provide insight into the art and history of Machaquilá and Seibal, as well as into the complex social history of this era throughout Mesoamerica. For example, visual and hieroglyphic evidence suggest the rulers of both Machaquilá and Seibal interacted with Maya polities to the east. Numerous polities in the eastern portion of the Southern Lowlands produced stelae in the ninth century, and hieroglyphic evidence suggests complex political interactions among them. Further analysis of the stela programs at these eastern sites could prove insightful to our understanding of ninth-century history and political interaction, including with the Pasión region. In addition, several contemporaneous cities outside of the Southern Maya Lowlands, including Chichén Itzá, Cacaxtla, and Xochicalco, shared with Seibal a propensity for visual

heterogeneity. The precedents the artists drew upon for inspiration, and the manner in which they integrated their eclectic references, however, are distinct. More generally, Esther Pasztory noted a pan-Mesoamerican penchant for 'style juxtapositions,' that is, for the use of multiple 'visual communicative systems' in both the artistic programs of cities and in single works of art.⁴¹ Assessing these phenomena as heterogeneous visual discourses could prove particularly informative on a theoretical level, providing a deeper understanding of the ways distinct visual 'systems' interact when integrated into single works or programs.⁴² Mesoamerica offers a rich body of material for further investigating the discursive nature of visual culture.

Acknowledgements

FAMSI made possible my preliminary dissertation research in Guatemala and at the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* archives of the Peabody Museum, at Harvard University, through research grant #01050. I thank FAMSI not only for this funding, but for their patience in allowing me to complete the dissertation prior to submitting this final report. Numerous other individuals and institutions also informed, facilitated, and improved this study. At the Museo Nacional de Antropología y Etnología in Guatemala City, Director Fernando Moscoso Möller and restorer Rodolfo Yaquián graciously provided access to sculptures in storage and granted permission to photograph sculptures both on display and in storage. The author's photograph of Machaquilá Stela 7, taken at the Museum, is included herein with their kind permission. At the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* archives at Harvard, Ian Graham, David Stuart, Barbara Fash, and James Fitzsimmons all graciously offered their time and expertise to further my investigations. Subsequent writing and research were greatly facilitated by a Junior Fellowship in Pre-Columbian Studies at Dumbarton Oaks during the 2004-2005 academic year. I thank the other fellows and the staff of Dumbarton Oaks for their numerous forms of assistance and advice. Among the many people that offered suggestions, advice, and access to unpublished resources, I would like to thank Elizabeth Boone, Victoria Bricker, Andrés Ciudad Ruiz, Markus Eberl, Stanley Guenter, David Hixson, Stephen Houston, Takeshi Inomata, Rosemary Joyce, Lily Just, Mary Ellen Miller, Mathew Moriarty, John Pohl, Merle Greene Robertson, Jeremy Sabloff, Alexandre Tokovinine, Gair Tourtellot, Irene Winter, and Marc Zender. David Redman, Associate Dean of the Graduate School at Princeton University, graciously extended library access to me to finish the dissertation in the fall of 2005.

⁴¹ Pasztory 1993:124.

⁴² Cf. Just 2000; 2004.

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