Dynasty Founder Yax K'uk' Mo' According to the Inscriptions

by John F. Harris

Inscriptions carved on monuments and structures found at Copán tell of a dynasty of rulers, sixteen in number, that held sway over the city for three and a half centuries. The king named Yax K'uk' Mo' was the first. Some of the inscriptions record events in the life of Yax K'uk' Mo', while others refer to relationships involving him or commemorations of him, but none come from the time when Yax K'uk' Mo' himself ruled (ca. AD 426–437). Our earliest "informant" is Popol K'inch, son of Yax K'uk' Mo'. The Xukpi Stone, one of ECAP's recent finds (see Sedat, this issue), records that Popol K'inch dedicated a tomb to his father around AD 437.

Fig. 1a, b. (a) Image of Yax K'uk' Mo' on Altar Q. (b) West side of the altar, a monument located in the West Court of the Acropolis. The dynastic founder is depicted at center left, with his son and successor, Popol K'inch seated behind him (far left). The monument was commissioned by Yax Pasah (center right).

(a) Drawing by Linda Schele. (b) Photograph by Robert J. Sharer

Fig. 2. Name glyphs of Yax K'uk' Mo' (1=K'inich, 2=Yax, 3=K'uk', 4=Mo', 5=Ahow). Sometimes yax was omitted.

Fig. 3. The 8.19.0.0.0 Period Ending (March 25, 416) on Copán Stela 15, dedicated by Water Lily Jaguar.

Fig. 4. Possible war and succession statements concerning Yax K'uk' Mo' on one side of Stela E.

Fig. 5. Accession and arrival of Yax K'uk' Mo' recorded on Copán Altar Q.
name, is almost always accompanied by the title K’iminich ("Sun-eyed"), although in one case the Ahaw title ("Ruler" or "Lord") was used instead (Fig. 2c). The personal name usually consists of a yax sign ("first" or "green") positioned above or in front of a bird head that combines both quetzal (\( \text{\textmu} \)) and macaw (\( m \)) features (Fig. 2a, 2b). This bird head typically has the characteristic quetzal crest and the encircled eye and/or prominent beak of a macaw. (In a text from Quirigua, a neighboring Maya city, two separate bird heads were used to represent \( \text{\textmu} \) and \( m \) [Fig. 2d] in writing the name of Copán’s dynastic founder.)

The earliest dated event attributed to Yax K’uk’ Mo’ is the B.19.0.0.0 (March 25, 416) Period Ending, recorded on Copán Stela 13 (Fig. 3). Period Endings were usually associated with reigning monarchs, but Yax K’uk’ Mo’ was probably not ruling at this date, since his accession, as discussed below, occurred a decade later. (See box on Maya calendrical dates.)

Two undated events which probably occurred about this time are recorded on Copán Stela E (Figs. 4, 6). The first of these states that Yax K’uk’ Mo’ was “downed.” It thus appears that Yax K’uk’ Mo’ was involved in a conflict or violence, possibly associated with his coming to power. The intriguing aspect of this statement comes from the condition of the bones, probably those of Yax K’uk’ Mo’, found in the recently excavated Hunal Tomb. Long before the death of the tomb occupant, his lower right arm sustained a severe injury which never healed; he had also received trauma to his left shoulder and head. Possibly the Stela E statement is alluding to the conflict which led to those injuries. So far, no other information about this event appears in any of the known Copán inscriptions. The “downing” statement is followed by a clause which relates that Yax K’uk’ Mo’ succeeded someone named K’ak’ Hun K’awil, an individual not mentioned in other Copán inscriptions. He may have been the last of a previous dynasty of rulers.

The next pertinent dates are recorded at both

Our final informant is Yax Pasah, the last bona-fide ruler at Copán, who in AD 775 commissioned Altar Q, a monument portraying all sixteen rulers in the dynasty. Thus texts about Yax K’uk’ Mo’ span a period of approximately 340 years. In addition to those by Popol K’iminich (Ruler 2) and Yax Pasah (Ruler 16), texts with information about Yax K’uk’ Mo’ were commissioned by Water Lily Jaguar (Ruler 7), Moon Jaguar (Ruler 10), K’ak’ Chan (Ruler 12), Smoke Ixim God K (Ruler 12), and 18 Rabbit (Ruler 15).

A full-figure image of Yax K’uk’ Mo’ appears on Altar Q, and information about him is identified by occurrences of his name glyph in the inscriptions (Figs. 1, 2). Ix K’uk’ Mo’, his personal

New Wing to be Named in Honor of Bruce & Peggy Mainwaring

In honor of the generosity, dedication, and leadership shown by Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Mainwaring throughout the Campaign for the East Wing, we are pleased to announce that the University of Pennsylvania Board of Trustees has approved the naming of the Museum’s Collections Storage and Study Wing as The A. Bruce and Margaret R. Mainwaring Wing.

Mr. Mainwaring has been Chair of the campaign from its inception, and has been vital in its success thus far. Because of the Mainwarings’ guidance throughout the campaign, and their generosity in contributing funding, time, and effort to it, we can feel sure that the campaign will be completed in time for the groundbreaking in the spring of 2000.

"We thank Mr. and Mrs. Mainwaring for all their efforts on behalf of the Museum. We are fortunate to have them as friends of the Museum," said Jeremy Salkoff, the William Director, after the announcement. Named funding opportunities are still available for the Mainwaring Wing. If you are interested in finding out more about these programs, please contact the Development Office at (215) 898-6031.

Museum Courtyard to Get a Facelift as Part of the Campaign for the East Wing

The A. Bruce and Margaret R. Mainwaring Wing for collections storage and study will extend to South Street along the eastern edge of the lower courtyard garden and thus complete the architectural frame for the courtyard originally envisioned by architect Wilson Eyre in 1895. And fortunately, one of the world’s leading landscape design firms, Philadelphia’s own Olm Partnership, will be responsible for restoring the picture that goes inside the frame. Plans for the restoration have enchanted former Museum Overseer Thomas Plan for the Thomas and Kitty Stoner Courtyard. Courtesy of Olm Partnership.
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The following names were omitted or listed incorrectly in the donor list in the last issue of Expedition. The Development Office regrets the error.

Mr. and Mrs. George G. Amsterdam should have been listed among the Donors to the East Wing.
Mr. and Mrs. Robert Craver should have been listed as Robert and Rhine Craver.

Fig. 7. Founding events involving Yax K'ul' Mo' in the text on Quirigua zoomorph P. Dedicated on 9.18.5.0.0 (Sept. 17, 795) by a late Quirigua ruler.

Fig. 8. Death statement for Yax K'ul' Mo' on the Hieroglyphic Stairway.

Fig. 9. Twelfth successor statement on Copan Stela 19 for Smoke Imix God K.

Fig. 10. Dedication statement for Copan Altar Q.

DYNASTY FOUNDER YAX K'UL' MO' ACCORDING TO THE INSCRIPTIONS 25
Copán and Quirigua. At Copán they appear in the text on Altar Q. The text begins with the date 8.19.10.10.17 (Sept. 6, 426), when K’uk’ Mo’ Ahaw received the God K scepter (Fig. 9). This is a metaphor for his accession. It happened at a place called Ch’okte Na, probably a reference to the ruling dynasty’s lineage house. Three days later, K’inch Yax K’uk’ Mo’ arrived at Ch’okte Na. This may be the actual date of his appearance at Copán. At Quirigua, the same dates are recorded on Zoomorph P (Fig. 7). While the dates are the same as on Altar Q, the events are different: the first is an arrival at Ch’okte Na, and the second is the setting of a stone monument. Both events are associated with Yol Tuk’, a person who is probably the founder of Quirigua’s ruling lineage. The text goes on to say that Yax K’uk’ Mo’ caused these events. Apparently it was under Yax K’uk’ Mo’s authority that the dynasty of Quirigua was established. This text supports the suspicion long held by archaeologists that from its earliest days until the demise of 18 Rabbit on 9.15.6.14.6 (May 3, 738), Quirigua was probably an outpost of Copán.

The most frequently noted event for Yax K’uk’ Mo’ is the celebration of the end of the 9th bak’tun, 9.0.0.0.0 (Dec. 11, 435). Stela 63 and the Motmot Stone (both commissioned by Popol K’inch), Stela 15 (commissioned by Water Lily Jaguar), and Stela J (commissioned by 18 Rabbit) all commemorate this important calendrical event. The ending of a bak’tun, which occurs only once in about 400 years, must have been a highly significant event for the Maya.

The inscriptions as currently understood are silent about further events associated with Yax K’uk’ Mo’ except his death and possible entombment. On the Hieroglyphic Stairway there is a badly eroded series of hieroglyphs with no clearly associated date which record his death (Figs. 8, 13).

As noted above, the text of the Xukpi Stone records the dedication of a tomb by Popol K’inch on 9.0.2.0.0 (Nov. 30, 437). Presumably the tomb was for his father, Yax K’uk’ Mo’. Assuming that this date marks approximately the death of Yax K’uk’ Mo’, it is evident that he ruled for only about 11 years. Although his reign was relatively short, memory of him is manifest not only in the texts of the subsequent rulers cited above, but also in the choice of motifs and designs used to decorate the buildings erected over the Early Classic structures associated with Yax K’uk’ Mo’ himself.

Other information about Yax K’uk’ Mo’ can be garnered from the inscriptions of Copán. For example, the Stela 63 text relates that he is the father of the 7th ruler, Popol K’inch. There are also numbered successor connections later rulers to Yax K’uk’ Mo’ itself. Thus on Stela 19, Smoke Imix God K is designated the 12th successor, and indeed he is the 12th ruler portrayed on Altar Q (Fig. 9). Some of Copán’s altars and buildings were designated as "belonging" to Yax K’uk’ Mo’. For example, Altar Q was named "The Altar of K’inch Yax K’uk’ Mo’" (Fig. 10), and an early structure under Copán Temple 11, dedicated by Moon Jaguar (Ruler 10), has a fire-dedication statement naming the temple "The House of K’inch Yax K’uk’ Mo’" (Fig. 11).

As noted in an accompanying article (see Sharer), Yax K’uk’ Mo’ was probably not a native of the Copán Valley, but may have come from the Peten, e.g., Tikal, or from Central Mexico. A hint of a possible Tikal connection is seen in the similar name Ku’ Mo’ which occurs in the text on a Tikal monument from slightly earlier times than the earliest dates for Yax K’uk’ Mo’ at Copán (Fig. 12).

The information about Yax K’uk’ Mo’ revealed in the recently deciphered inscriptions of Copán and Quirigua could never be garnered from archaeology alone. The combination of this information with the stunning revelations of the recent excavations into the early levels of the Copán Acropolis has provided an unparalleled understanding of this most important Maya ruling lineage founder.

Acknowledgments

Decipherments of the pertinent Copán and Quirigua inscriptions discussed in this paper have been done primarily by Linda Schele, Nikolai Grube, David Stuart, and Matthew Looper. The hieroglyphs shown in this paper are after drawings done primarily by Linda Schele, Barbara Fash, Matthew Looper, and David Stuart.

Maya Calendrical Dates

The Maya kept track of absolute time in bak’tuns (ca. 400 years each), katuns (ca. 20 years each), tun (ca. one year each), winats (20 days each), and kins (days) measured from a creation date of August 13, 3114 BC. These units bear some analogy to our millennia, centuries, decades, years, weeks, and days. The form of notation used to represent dates in Maya time lists the number of these time units which have elapsed since the creation date arranged in descending order from left to right starting with bak’tuns; the units are separated by periods.

9.13.8.2.1 = a date which is 9 bak’tuns, 13 katuns, 8 tuns, 2 winats, and 1 day (kin) after the creation date of August 13, 3114 BC.

The completions of 5, 10, and 15 tun periods, and the completions of katuns and bak’tuns were frequently noted in Maya inscriptions; they were celebrated with "Period Ending" rituals, e.g., scattering (presumably of blood) and erection of monuments. Thus, 9.0.0.0.0 was an important bak’tun ending (the 9th) and 8.19.0.0.0 was an important katun ending (the 19th).
Uncovering Copán’s Earliest Royal Tombs

by Ellen E. Bell, Loo P. Traxler, David W. Sedat, and Robert J. Sharer

Fig. 1. Remains of the royal woman in the Margarita Tomb with jade and shell ornaments, after the debris had been cleared (1996). The red pigment covering the bones is cinnamon, a toxic pigment.

Photograph by Robert J. Sharer

The royal tombs found buried deep within the core of the Acropolis are a potent source of information about Early Classic life at Copán. In order to glean as much information as possible about the tomb occupants and the jumble of objects surrounding them (Fig. 1), precise excavation techniques—and infinite patience—are called for.

Fig. 2. Some of the ceramic vessels found on the floor of the Margarita offering chamber.

Photograph by Robert J. Sharer

JOHN HARRIS is a retired chemist (Ph.D. University of Pennsylvania) whose interest in Maya hieroglyphic writing began with the early Maya Weekends at the UPM, and was intensified by many years’ attendance at Linda Schele’s Advanced Seminar in Maya Hieroglyphic Writing at the University of Texas in Austin. Together with Stephen Stearns, he is the author of Understanding Maya Inscriptions (2nd ed. University Museum Publications, 1997). In recent years, he has co-taught a graduate course on Maya hieroglyphic writing in Penn’s Anthropology Department. He is currently a Research Associate in the American Section of the University of Pennsylvania Museum.