

**THE RITUAL SPACE OF YO'OKOP'S QUEEN CHAAK KAB:  
INSCRIPTIONS, SCULPTURE, AND ARCHITECTURE OF A LESSER-KNOWN  
MAYA CITY**

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## **Abstract**

Although little-studied, new data shows that Yo'okop was a major center occupied from the Middle Formative through the Postclassic periods in central Quintana Roo. Intensive investigation at Yo'okop was begun in 2000 by Justine Shaw and Dave Johnstone and during the 2001 field season we joined them to document the sculpture and inscriptions. The project has since expanded into a survey of the Cochuah Region. In this paper the authors focus on Yo'okop's Queen Chaak Kab, named in an inscription at the site's ritual center (architectural Group A). We interpret the inscription and a concurrent program of sculpture and architecture dating from 590 to 650 CE as a statement about both ritual space and gender. Of particular importance is that known references to women and men appear separated by great distances. Chaak Kab is named on a building (Structure S5E1-1) adjacent to the largest architecture at the site (Structure S4W1-1), while the concurrently erected sculptures depicting men were likely erected in another architectural grouping 718 meters away (architectural Group B).

Although little-studied, Yo'okop was a major Maya center occupied from the Middle Formative through the Postclassic periods in central Quintana Roo. The area is of interest historically because it is where the Caste Wars began, and it was subsequently at the heart of the Maya state Chan Santa Cruz. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the area's infrastructure was in poor condition and some communities were hostile towards foreigners. Given these realities, it is unsurprising that archaeologists have only begun to establish long-term projects within the last decade.

Yo'okop was first documented in 1927 by the archaeologist Herbert Spinden along with the *New York Times* reporter Gregory Mason. Spinden and Mason referred to the site simply as *Okop*—the indigenous name for the site's shallow lake or *aguada*. They noted that the site boasted grand architecture, including a pyramid that we now know is 28 meters tall—only two meters shorter than the Castillo at Chichén Itzá. Despite the impressiveness of the site, subsequent attention to it consisted only of brief visits. In the 1950's, Yo'okop was visited by a team from the Carnegie Institution of Washington. In the 1970's, the site was visited by Reginald Wilson, a medical missionary who was also an amateur archaeologist, and later by the epigrapher Ian Graham. Intensive investigation began only in the year 2000 under the direction of Justine Shaw and Dave Johnstone. The authors of this paper have been affiliated with the project since the 2001 field season, when they joined Shaw and Johnstone at Yo'okop to document the sculpture and inscriptions. Shaw and Johnstone have since expanded the project into a survey of the broader Cochuah Region.

Yo'okop's Queen Chaak Kab is named in an inscription at architectural Group A, one of the site's three ritual centers. The authors interpret Queen Chaak Kab in light of other archaeological data from Yo'okop and compare her reign to those of other royal women. They

thus interpret the inscription and a concurrent program of sculpture and architecture as a statement about both ritual space and gender.

Three figural sculptures and five hieroglyphic stones have been recovered at Yo'okop. These monuments can be dated to a time that bridges the Early to Late Classic periods—between approximately 590 and 650 CE. These sculptures and stones were prominently displayed in public space, and they reveal aspects of Yo'okop's political configuration. The subjects of the sculptures are elites and rulers from the site while the phrases that can be reconstructed from the stones indicate a strong political interaction between Yo'okop and the hegemonic house of Kaan associated with the sites Dzibanche and Calakmul in the southern lowlands.

A unique structure (S5E1-1) associated with Queen Chaak Kab is located in the core of Group A, the southernmost architectural group at Yo'okop, near the site's only year-round surface source of water, a large aguada. The authors postulate, based on the structure's shape and location, that S5E1-1 was used for water-related ritual. Henceforth the authors will refer to it as the Water Pyramid. It is a square pyramidal structure. A square depression, similar to a moat in appearance, is at its mid-elevation. Although the depression may have resulted from a collapsed substructure, it is also possible that the depression was an intentional part of the design. If so, the depression may have been constructed to hold water (Shaw, et al. 2000:24) and may have identified the pyramid as a water mountain.

Five hieroglyphic stones that describe Queen Chaak Kab were found in Group A in the vicinity of the Water Pyramid (figure 1). Three of the stones were located together to the east of it by the medical missionary Reginald Wilson (Wilson 1972:84). According to local residents the stones

had originally been part of the Water Pyramid. Because of their size, the authors suggest that the stones were risers in a hieroglyphic stairway and that they can be read as a cohesive text.

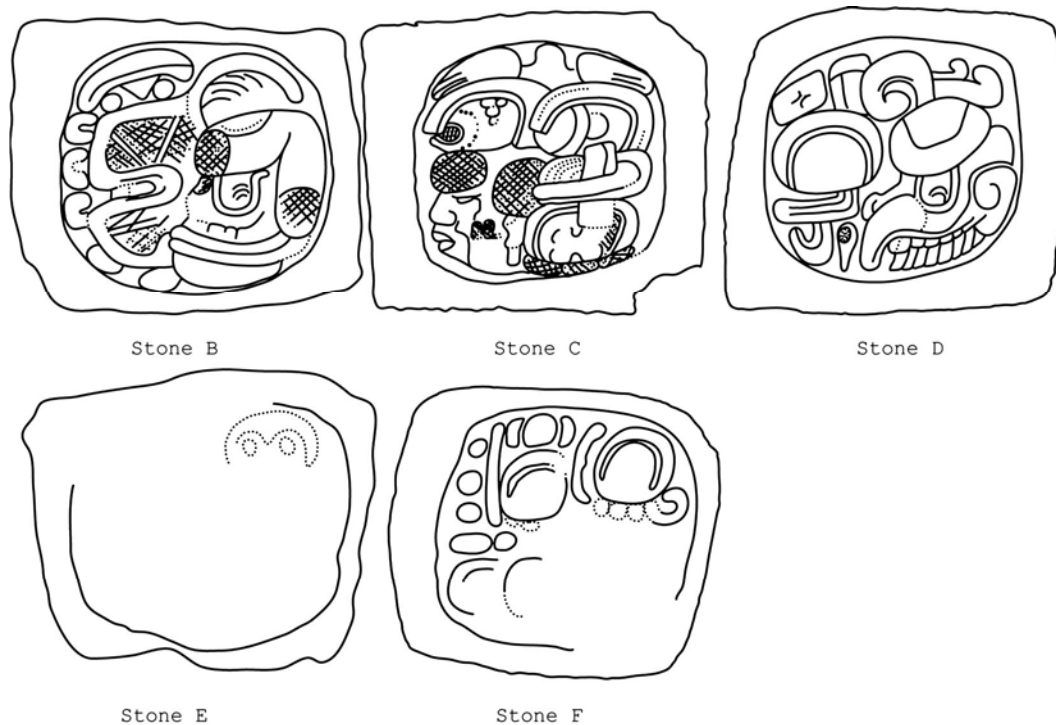


Figure 1. Stones A, B, C, D, and E from Yo'okop. Drawing by Travis Nygard and Linnea Wren.

The names and titles recorded on the stones describe the role of Queen Chaak Kab in the political space of Yo'okop specifically and the lowland Maya generally. Simon Martin has identified the name on Stone B as Sky Witness (Martin 1997:861; Martin and Grube 2008:104; Shaw, et al. 2000:104),<sup>1</sup> the seventeenth ruler of the Kaan or “snake” kingdom. While ruling the Kaan kingdom from 561 CE to an unknown date, Sky Witness pursued an aggressive policy of expansion. Although the Kaan kingdom emblem glyph has not been recovered at Yo'okop, the

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<sup>1</sup> Although Simon Martin has identified the name as Sky Witness, he notes that this name may refer to someone other than the individual who ruled the Kaan kingdom (personal communication 2003).

appearance of Sky Witness's name suggests that the larger Kaan polity may have played a critical role here in the sixth century.

Queen Chaak Kab herself is named on Stone C. The upper three signs are the phonetic form of the *kaloomte'* title, which refers to lineage heads related to an overlord (Stuart, et al. 1989) and to nobles who headed provincial towns under a regional overlord (Coe 1992:72). The lower left sign on Stone C consists of a profile human head marked by crosshatched areas at the forehead, ear and cheek. While eroded on the bottom edges, the narrow parallel cheek markings appear to be shaped like the letters "IL." The head sign on Stone C is the *ix* or *na* title, meaning "lady." The lower right sign below the *kaloomte'* title on Stone C consists of a hand-held ax—a logogram for *chaak*. The lowermost right sign, although too eroded to make an unequivocal identification, appears to be *kab*, or "earth." Thus, Stone C as a whole reads "kaloomte' ix chaak kab." Or, in loose English, the governor, the Queen, the chopper of the earth (Phil Wanyerka, personal communication 2002).

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Based on comparisons with queens at other sites, the authors speculate that the alliance between Yo'okop and the Kaan polity was secured by means of a marriage union between a Kaan lady, who may be identified as Queen Chaak Kab, and a local lord. At least two similar marriage unions are known from the monumental inscriptions of client states of the Kaan kingdom. At La Corona (also known as Sak Nikte' and Site Q), a tablet inscription records the marriage of a Calakmul woman to the local ruler K'inich Yook (667–c. 682 CE). K'inich Yook is described as the subordinate of the Calakmul ruler Yuknoom the Great (Yuknoom Ch'een II 636–686 CE) (Freidel

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Martin has suggested that the cross-hatched suffix in the final compound might be read as *ma* (personal communication 2003). Patterns of female appellation phrases in relationship to the exercise of power and representation of gender roles are discussed by Erika Hewitt (1999).

and Guenter 2003). At Naachtun, an inscription on Stela 18 suggests that a Kaan woman entered into the El Peru dynasty. This woman can be presumed to be Ix Chan Ajaw, the subject of Stela 34 from El Peru (Wanyerka 1996:82).<sup>3</sup> The prominence accorded to women of the Kaan polity on the monumental records at Sak Nikte, El Peru, and, presumably, Yo'okop confirms the important role played by women in establishing and maintaining dynastic power (Culbert 1991; Mathews and Willey 1991; Schele and Mathews 1991; Marcus 1992; Josserand 2002). In addition, the inscriptions of three sites, Palenque, Tikal, and Naranjo, document women who were themselves rulers (Coggins 1975:218-222; Martin and Grube 2000:27, 38-39, 74-75, 159-162). The designation of the *kaloomte'* title upon Queen Chaak Kab may indicate that the woman named on Stone C was not only a subsidiary lord to Sky Witness, the ruler of a hegemonic state, but also a ruler in her own right at Yo'okop (Simon Martin, personal communication 2003).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Textual evidence suggests that the marriage of Ix Chan Ajaw was arranged by the Kaan ruler Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' (686-695? CE) to expand the house of Kaan's sphere of influence (Wanyerka 1996:82). In figural monuments at both La Corona and El Peru the Kaan women are prominently featured. The La Corona tablet depicts only women and lists the royal female (but not male) lineage (Freidel and Guenter 2003). At El Peru, a throne or altar is placed in front of Stela 34 which depicts Ix Chan Ajaw. The pre-eminence of Ix Chan Ajaw is further demonstrated by the central location of Stela 34 between Stelae 33 and 35, both of which depict men facing inward (Wanyerka 1996:72-74, 81).

<sup>4</sup> The relationship between Maya domains of power and gender is not well understood. One approach to this issue has regarded male and female identities as dichotomies and has argued that female properties of fertility were either imitated or appropriated by Maya elite males to strengthen their ritual roles and political offices (Schele 1979; Stone 1988, 1991). Other approaches have proposed that the Maya elite construed genders as performative (Joyce 1996, 2000) or as fluid (Looper 2002).

Stone D defines Queen Chaak Kab's sovereignty at Yo'okop. The left sign of the compound glyph records the phrase, *ajaw-k'in(?) -ni-ya* meaning "in the lordship" or "in the *ajaw*ship." The right sign consists of a supernatural being with a disc-shaped headdress—the logographic sign for the word *imix*, meaning "water, waterlily, lake or sea."<sup>5</sup> Above the *imix* sign is the locative marker *nal*. Together the compound glyph records a royal title identifying the subject as the "lordly person of the waters" (Phil Wanyerka, personal communication 2002). Evidence from Copán, Tikal, Kinal, and La Milpa indicates that water management and water rituals were of great concern to other rulers during this time period (Davis-Salazar 2003; Scarborough 1993; Scarborough, et al. 1994). At Yo'okop the *ajaw nal imix* title almost certainly refers to the site's large aguada. The prominent display of this title at Yo'okop on an architectural structure in close proximity to the aguada suggests that water resources and manipulation of water rituals were a crucial basis of the status and authority claimed by the site's rulers.

Taken in sequence, these three stones form a complete phrase describing how the Kaan polity played a crucial role in the affairs of the smaller and distant site of Yo'okop. The hieroglyphic text recorded on Stones B, C, and D can be translated as "Queen Chop the Earth, the governor under Sky Witness, is the lordly person of the waters."

Two additional carved blocks, Stones E and F, were located by Johnstone and Shaw during the 2000 field season in Group A and can be used to date the rulership of Queen Chaak Kab to 593 CE. Also located near the Water Pyramid (Shaw, et al. 2000:54), Stones E and F seem to have been risers in the same hieroglyphic stairway as Stones B, C, and D. The upper left quadrant of

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<sup>5</sup> An alternate reading of the supernatural being on Stone D, proposed by Dave Johnstone, is that it may represent the head form of K'awiil (Shaw et. al. 2000: 54).

stone F reads eight *k'atuns*, and the upper right quadrant records the phrase *u kahi*, meaning “by the action of” or “under the auspices of” (Shaw, et al. 2000: 58). The *u kahi* phrase is fitting because it generally refers to a hierarchical relationship between a lord and subordinate noble. The inscription may have indicated, therefore, that the end of the eighth *k'atun* was celebrated in 593 CE (9.8.0.0.0) by Queen Chaak Kab under the auspices of Sky Witness (Simon Martin, personal communication 2003).

The inscribed text formed by Stones B, C, D, E, and F constitutes the only monumental record yet recovered for Group A. In Group B, by contrast, three figural sculptures have been recovered. The theme of rulership dominates the sculpture of Group B as well as the inscribed text of Group A. However, the placement of sculptures celebrating male rulers versus the glyphic reference to a female ruler in separated physical contexts indicates that the major architectural groups may have been gendered. Group A is notable for the celebration of a Yo'okop queen in the Water Pyramid text. To its north, Group B is notable for the opposite. Its monumental record, which consists of two stelae and a ballcourt marker, focuses exclusively on male rulership and contains no female text or imagery.<sup>6</sup>

Tatiana Proskouriakoff dated the style and iconography of Stela 1 (figure 2) to the beginning of the Late Classic period, between 613–652 CE (9.9.0.0.0–9.11.0.0.0) (Stromsvik, et al. 1955:173). The authors attribute the same Late Classic dates to Stelae 2 and 3, also on stylistic

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<sup>6</sup> All of the stelae were recovered fallen in Group B, but the setting stones have not yet been located. As such, the authors do not draw conclusions about the specific positioning of the stelae during Classic times.

and iconographic grounds, and thus suggest that they formed a cohesive sculptural program.<sup>7</sup>

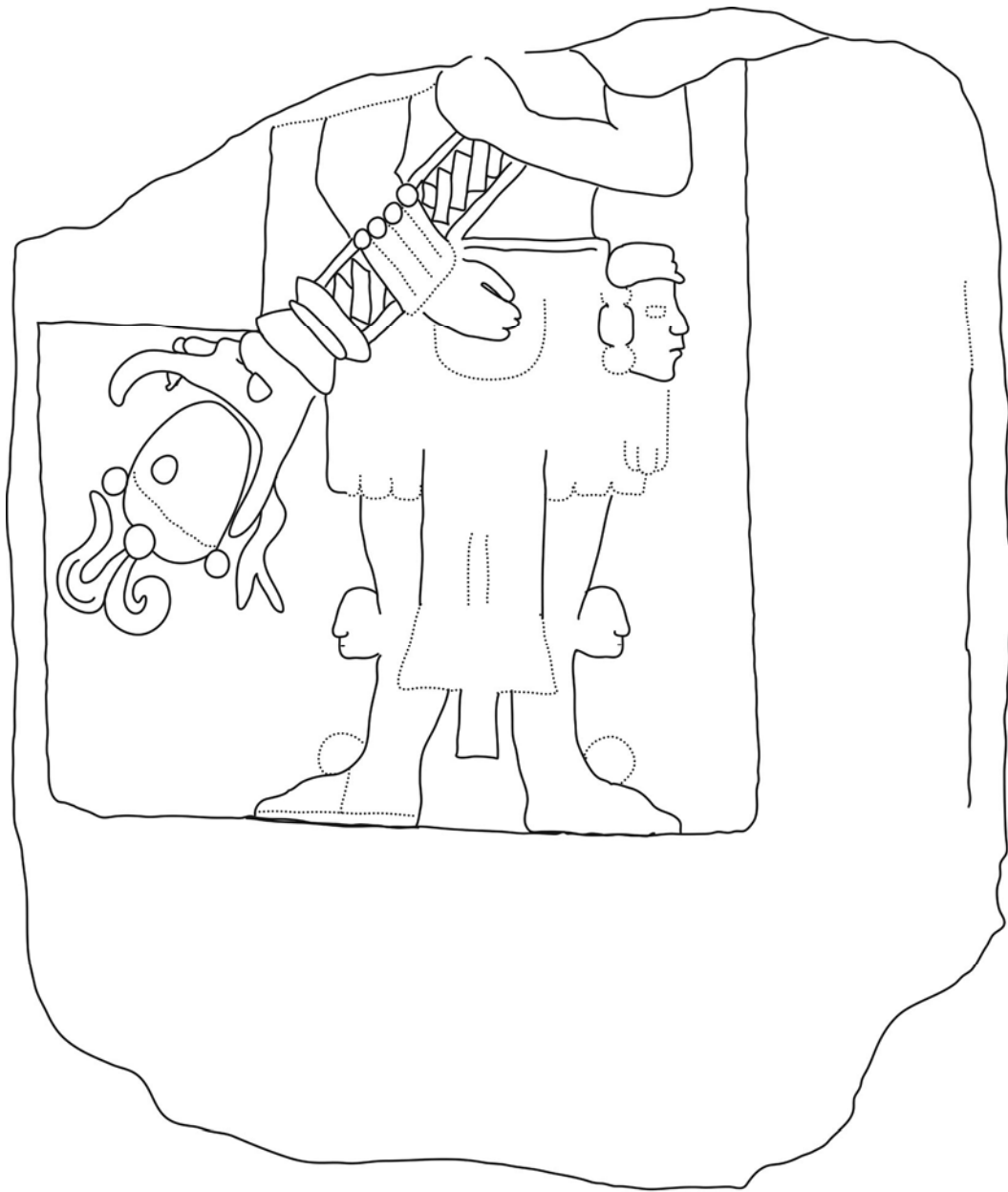


Figure 2. Stela 1 from Yo'okop. Drawing by Travis Nygard and Linnea Wren.

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<sup>7</sup> Dave Johnstone dissents on the dating of Stela 3 on stylistic grounds. He notes that carving enclosed cartouches and using the stela's edge are also seen on stelae at Tikal and Uaxactun that are firmly dated to the Early Classic, and that it is probable that Yo'okop's Stela 3 was carved at that time.

Stela 1, recovered in a plaza in Group B (Shaw 2001b:figs. 5-6), depicts a single male lord standing in a frontal pose. The upper section of the monument is missing, and the back of the monument is uncarved (Wilson 1972:83; 1974:12). His costume includes a wrist cuff bordered by spherical beads, a serpent bar, a belt adorned with heads in maw helmets, celt-shaped danglers below the heads, a skirt fringed with shell tinklers or beads and cloth, a loincloth and pendant, garters with attached heads, and ornamented sandals. The illegible outlines of a double column of glyphs appear on the upper left portion of the stela.

Stela 3 (figure 3) was recovered a short distance from Stela 1 in Group B (Shaw 2001b:figs. 5-6). It also depicts a standing male figure in a frontal pose. The inscription in column A suggests this figure is a *one katun ajaw*. When found during the 1970s the monument was in poor condition, being broken into approximately ten pieces (Wilson 1972:84; 1974:13). The upper portion is damaged from erosion. The lower torso of the figure, only partially visible, is costumed with a belt-mask and three pendants; a skirt; a loincloth with a pendant extending to the ground; and ornamented sandals. Such elongated loincloth pendants are characteristic of the central and southern lowlands, in contrast to the shorter pendants of the northern lowlands.

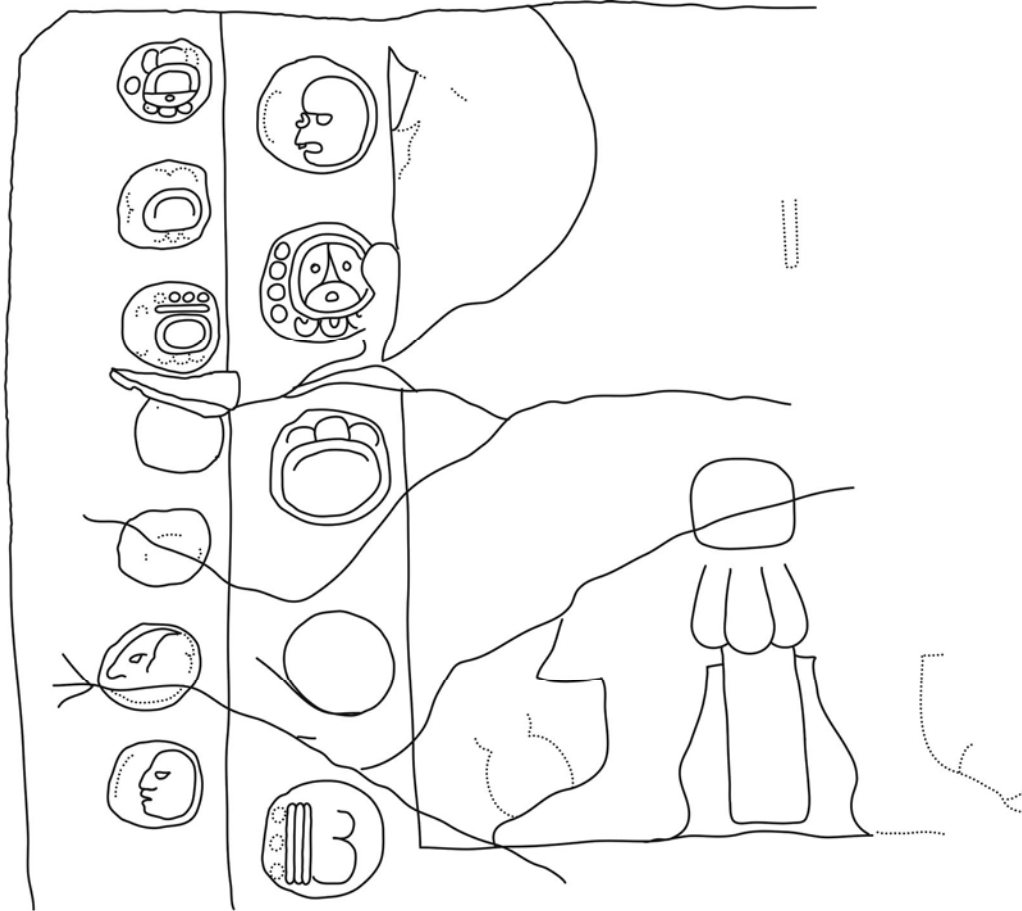


Figure 3. Stela 3 from Yo'okop. Drawing by Travis Nygard and Linnea Wren.

Only two elements in the upper portion of the monument are visible. A narrow, long, and carefully-worked depression is incised into the subject's chest. The depression may have been intended to hold an inset of another material, such as jade or obsidian. In the extreme upper left hand corner the partial outline of a fish can be tentatively recognized. Fish nibbling from a flower are typically incorporated into the headdress of the Water Lily Monster. This motif was also prevalent at Copán during the Late Classic period, where Barbara Fash suggests that it referred both to sacred concepts of the cosmos and to regal strategies of water management (Davis-Salazar 2003:293-294).

Although termed Stela 2 by previous investigators (Wilson 1972:84; 1974:13), the third monument in Group B (figure 4) employs a horizontal composition typical of architectural panels rather than the vertical format of a freestanding stela. It was recovered 100 meters north of a Classic period ballcourt, (Structures N5W2-6 and N5W2-7) (Shaw 2001b:figs. 5-6; Wilson 1972:81; 1974:9), in which a partial ring has been located (Shaw 2001b:24). The authors postulate that Stela 2 is now located in a secondary context but that its original location was in the ballcourt itself.

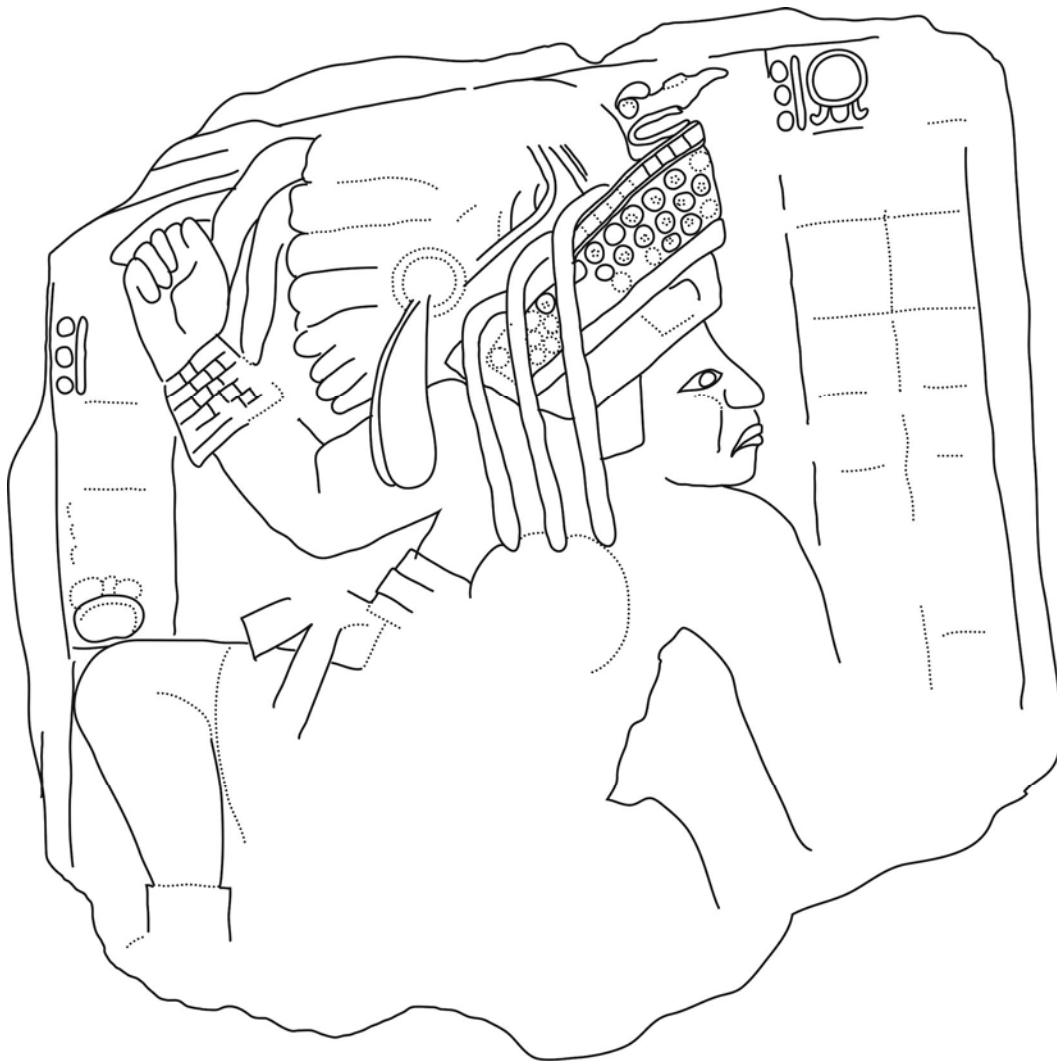


Figure 4. Stela 2 from Yo'okop. Drawing by Travis Nygard and Linnea Wren.

Stela 2 depicts a ballplayer kneeling with one leg on the ground and with one arm upraised. He wears a pectoral; a wristlet on his upraised arm; a headdress combining a wide browpiece with a full-bodied bird and three animal tails; and a ballplayer's yoke. Although somewhat eroded, shallow incised lines on the abdomen of the bird suggest that it is wearing an obsidian mirror. If so, this headdress may represent the principal bird deity, and its elite wearer may personify the world tree.

The dynamic nature of ritual space at Yo'okop is suggested by the action depicted on Stela 2. The ballplayer represented on the panel can be interpreted as a living agent who moves symbolically between the world's surface and the upper and underworlds. The primordial ballgame, described in the Popol Vuh (Tedlock 1985), took place in the underworld and was played by the Hero Twins against the Lords of Death. The pose assumed by the subject of Stela 2 activates the space around the relief as part of an underworld ballcourt and enmeshes the viewer in the ballgame of creation mythology.

The use of hieroglyphic texts and figurative imagery at Yo'okop appears to be a response to external pressures emanating from the southern lowlands. The impetus to erect figurative sculpture corresponds in date with the effort of the Kaan polity to control Yo'okop. Previous to 593 CE (9.8.0.0.0), Yo'okop rulers seem to have felt little need to commission monuments to define their identities or to celebrate their achievements. In 593, the hieroglyphic text celebrating Queen Chaak Kab and the hegemony of the Kaan polity was embedded in the Water Pyramid in Group A. Between 613 and 653 CE, three stela depicting elite males were erected in Group B.

Extensive damage to the glyphic inscriptions accompanying the sculptural monuments makes it impossible to identify the elite males depicted on Stelae 1, 2, and 3 as either local lords or distant overlords. The authors therefore suggest two alternate scenarios. If they represent overlords imposed upon Yo'okop by a hegemonic state, then Stelae 1, 2, and 3 may have been intended to reinforce the house of Kaan's rulership. In this way, Kaan rulers might have depicted themselves on sculpture at Yo'okop in order to mark the site as a space that they controlled. Alternatively, if they represent lords of local reign, then Stelae 1, 2, and 3 may have been intended to portray the Yo'okop elites as autonomous or semi-autonomous rulers. Their erection of monuments may have been a way to distinguish their identities from that of their Calakmul overlord or even to assert themselves as politically independent agents following a period of subordination.

Ultimately, this program of sculptures and hieroglyphic inscriptions testifies not only to the importance of marriages to cement alliances between sites as far apart as Yo'okop and the Kaan polity's epicenter at Dzibanche or Calakmul, but to the importance of gender in the construction of sacred space. As we look back at Yo'okop through its material remains we can glimpse a culture in which Queen Chaak Kab ruled over her subjects with an eye toward her home in the Kaan polity, and we can begin to piece together the long-neglected story of sites in the Cochuah region of Quintana Roo.

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