

Tikal, Guatemala

A Rationale for the Placement of the Funerary Pyramids

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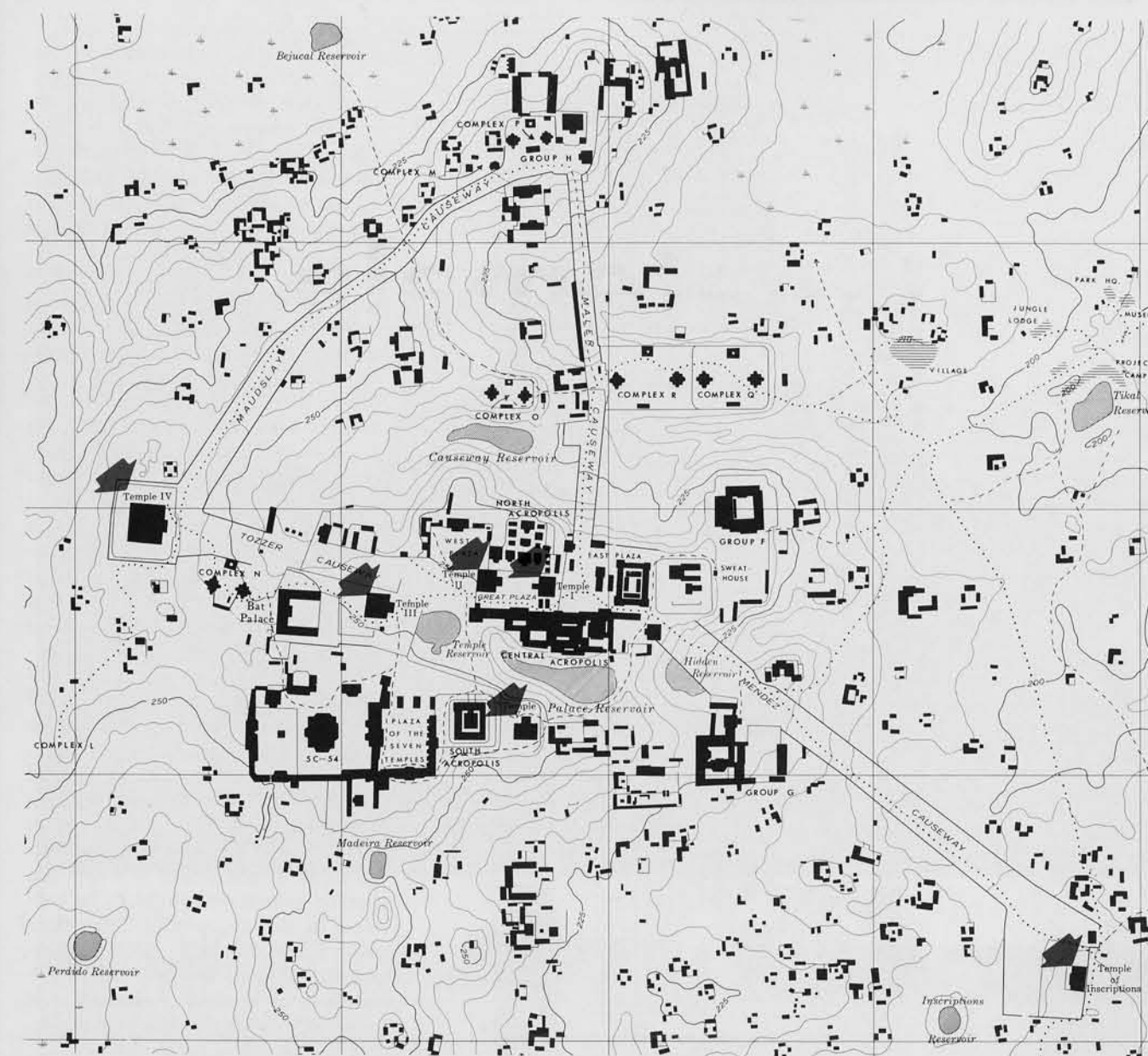
For more than a hundred years, the towering pyramids at Tikal, Guatemala,

have captured both popular and scholarly fancy. They form the very basis of our notion of a Maya pyramid, and since they appeared on the secret enemy planet in "Star Wars," the Tikal pyramids have entered the consciousness of countless

people. Six great pyramids, constructed over a period of just less than a hundred years, roughly from the beginning to the end of the eighth century A.D., redefined Tikal. Does the spatial organization of these pyramids with regard to



1 Tikal, Temple I as seen from the superstructure of Temple II. Ruler A's tomb was found at the base of the pyramid. Construction of the massive building was begun immediately after his death in the first quarter of the 8th century.



2

Map of Tikal. The six temples discussed in the article are indicated on this map. (By Carr and Hazard, after Coe 1967.)

one another have a structure that can be interpreted today, over a thousand years after the abandonment of this Maya city? Surely the ancient inhabitants of Tikal oriented the great temples as they did for specific reasons, and the order of their construction shows that they follow a basic principle of elite Classic Maya society, one already recognized in Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions and sculpture: that is, the structure of the ruling family.

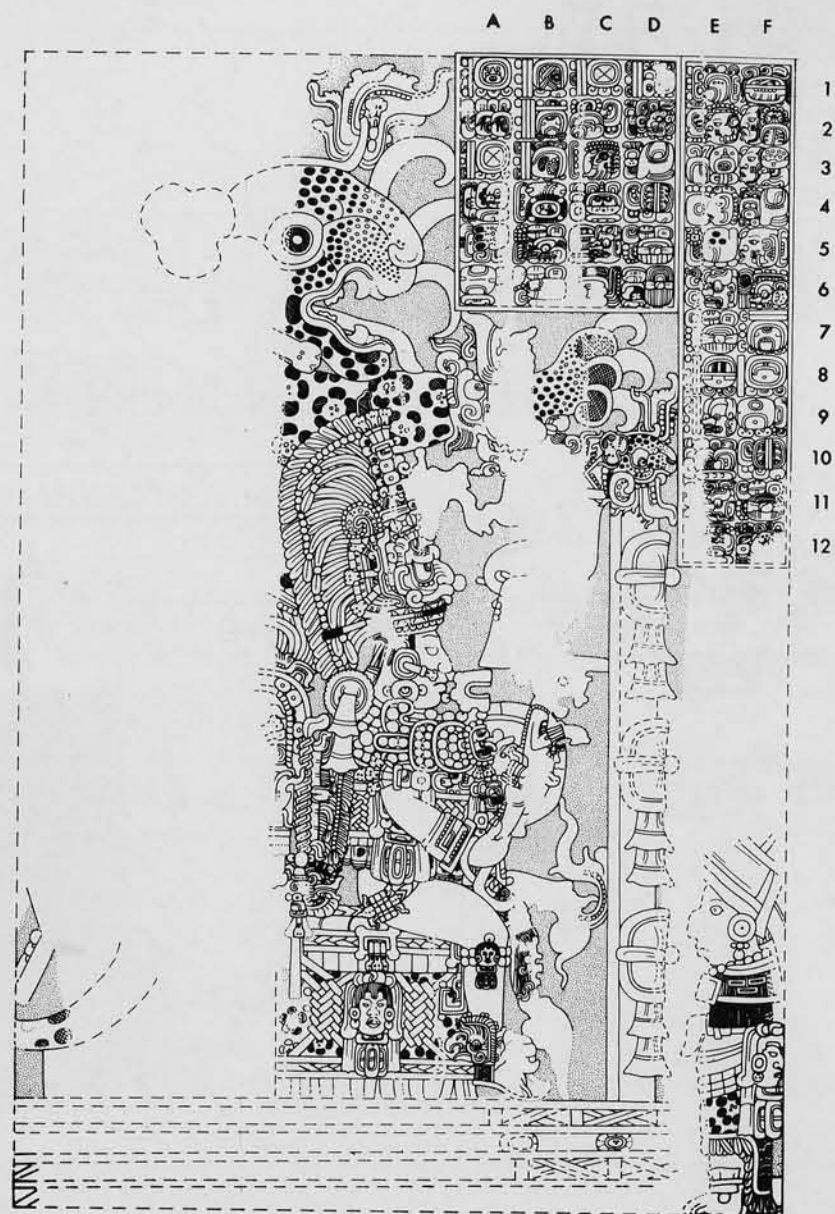
The relevant temples are the great ones: I, II, III, IV, V, and the Temple of the Inscriptions (VI) (Fig. 2). Of these six temples, only I and

II have been excavated, but the dating of the sequence of construction can be determined for III, IV, and VI, leaving only V without chronological placement. A review of this chronology reveals that, in sequence, the pyramids were placed in a meaningful configuration.

Dynastic Building at Tikal

Buried within Temple I (Fig. 1) was the tomb of Tikal Ruler A, as identified by Christopher Jones.

Ruler A was also the subject of the lintels of Temple I (Jones 1977). Following troubled times and a period of impoverished art and architecture at Tikal, this ruler reconfirmed the glory of Tikal, and initiated an active building program. He died ca. 9.14.11.17.3, or A.D. 722, as determined from the last date inscribed on an offering in the tomb. Ruler A was buried with rich offerings of ceramics, jade, cloth, jaguar pelt, and carved bones. The lintels that span the narrow chambers of the temple show him in a supernatural environment, probably that of transformation and



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Lintel 3, Temple I. (By W. R. Coe, after Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: Fig. 70.)

apotheosis after death (Fig. 3), even though the dates of the lintels emphasize his achievements during the last decade of the seventh century. From the tomb at the base to the lintels above, the temple can be seen as a personification of the ruler himself. The pyramid itself rises in nine distinct levels, perhaps a reference to the nine layers of the Underworld described by both Aztec and Maya at the time of the Conquest. The belief may have been that the dead king ascended through the nine levels to be

enthroned in the upperworld, architecturally cast as the superstructure of the temple and perhaps illustrated on the lintels.

This configuration compares closely to that of the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, also a nine-level pyramid, where the king Pacal was buried at the base of the temple. The Palenque temple was constructed with an interior staircase that leads from superstructure to tomb, and was built before the ruler's death. Although the Tikal temple was built after the

ruler's death, unlike that at Palenque, there is no reason to believe that the entire construction was not planned in Ruler A's lifetime. After all, Temple II was completed during his life, perhaps just a year or so before his death, and Temple I must have been planned as its partner across the plaza.

Temple II housed no tomb, at least on ground level, but during the 1960s, the Tikal Project of the University of Pennsylvania determined that it was probably completed two or three years before Temple I was begun (Fig. 4). As in Temple I, Temple II's narrow chambers are spanned by wooden lintels. The surviving pictorial lintel of Temple II bears no text, but it clearly shows a woman. Given the records of women associated with Ruler A, it is likely that Temple II is dedicated to a wife, one whose body was perhaps interred elsewhere, at her native site, for example, or not placed at ground level (Coggins 1975:455). One might compare the pattern at Altun Ha, where royal tombs were found on axis with the staircase, but near the top of the structure, rather than at their base (Pendergast 1969). Although this placement of tombs has been previously thought to be limited to Belize, preliminary data from Caracol indicate similar placement. Caracol is also within the borders of modern Belize, but it generally follows Peten patterns in terms of art and architecture. Temples I and II appear to be personifications of a husband and wife, the female shorter, squatter, and broader than the male (Fig. 5). The implications of this relationship are considered below.

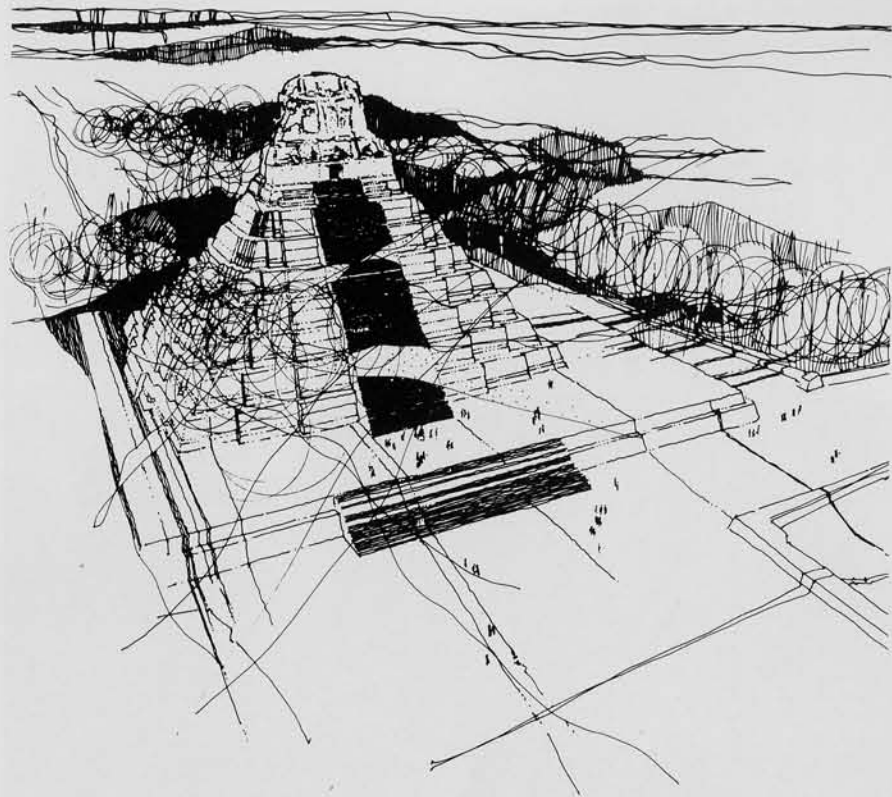
Temples IV, III, and V all repeat elements of Temple I. Although they have not been excavated, they too probably house the tombs of Late Classic rulers at Tikal. Temple IV (Fig. 6) repeats many features of Temple I: it is a nine-level pyramid, although on a far grander scale than Temple I, and it bears two wooden lintels that repeat the supernatural imagery of those of Temple I. Again the ruler is shown in two otherworldly scenes, perhaps of apotheosis, and he is identified as Ruler B by Jones and also as the son of



4
Tikal, Temple II.



5
Tikal, Great Plaza, as seen from the superstructure of Temple V.



6
Tikal, Temple IV. The largest of all Tikal temples, Temple IV undoubtedly holds the tomb of an important 8th century dynast. (By W. Pearson, in Coe 1967:81)

Ruler A (Jones 1977). In all likelihood, Ruler B lies within Temple IV.

Published references by the Tikal Project up to now have considered Structure 5D-73 to be the likely place of Ruler B's burial. A rich tomb, known as the tomb of the 'Jade Jaguar,' was recovered from this structure, and objects found there make clear reference to the royal family, to which the interred must have belonged. It seems unlikely, however, that the interred was Ruler B himself, whose public acclaim is promoted energetically from Temple IV. A problem with the Tikal Project solution to Ruler B's place of interment is that it leaves no room for undiscovered material, including, in this case, a tomb in Temple IV.

Temple III is shorter and narrower than IV although larger than I, and shares the nine-level format

with both. It is also unexcavated. Although it does not have carved lintels identifying the associated ruler, it does have a carved stela and altar at the base of the staircase, while those of its predecessors are plain. Stela 24, at the base of Temple III, marks events in the reign of Ruler C, so it seems reasonable to attribute this pyramid to that ruler. Given what we know of Maya elite funerary patterns, particularly at Tikal, where references to the interred are generally made in public imagery, Ruler C is probably buried within Temple III.

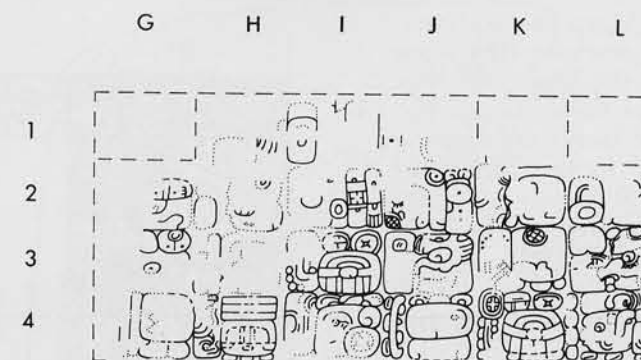
"Hel" numbers, recording a successive count of rulers, indicate a numbered ruler between Rulers B (#27) and C (#29), but no stela names this individual (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: 129). Temple VI (known as the Temple of the Inscriptions) and not to be confused with the pyramid of the same name

"Rulers often proclaim their own glorification at the same time they honor and name their parents."

at Palenque) is slightly different from the others: the pyramid has fewer levels and lacks carved wooden lintels. Most important, the stucco roofcomb ornament was inscribed with a long text. The protagonist of this text can be identified as a ruler with a unique name glyph who had the same parents as Ruler C, but left no other record (Panel Z, Temple of the Inscriptions, Fig. 7). In all likelihood, this is ruler #28, and we can call him BC. (Stephen D. Houston has studied the possible candidates for the gaps left in the Tikal dynasty as reconstructed by Jones [1977].) As with all Tikal rulers, there is no record of his death. Although BC's record is on the roofcomb of Temple VI, the stone monument in front of the structure is dedicated to Ruler B, making the association of BC and the temple less clear. The interred, however, was perhaps the older son of Ruler B, thus the older brother of Ruler C, and a monument to the father was placed there after the father and older son had both died.

Finally, Temple V gives no clues to the inhabitant of the tomb within. It is a nine-level pyramid of less mass than III or IV and more than I. Its proportions can be compared to Temple IV, however, and it may have been built at about the same time. Temples I and II, then, are the earliest of the series, followed by IV and VI, and, as far as can be determined by the inscriptions, III completes the series. Temple V either precedes or succeeds Temple IV.

The first buildings in this sequence, Temples I and II, were erected as a pair. They are commemorative monuments, and they suggest a specific relationship not only to one another but also to the North Acropolis, which they frame (Fig. 5). Archaeological exploration of the North Acropolis has shown that this north-to-south oriented complex housed the tombs of the Early Classic Tikal rulers (Coggins 1975), a pattern dramatically broken by the east-to-west orientation of Temples I and II in the Late Classic. It is as if Ruler A sought both to enshrine the past and to establish a new order, a practice



Panel Z

7
Panel Z, Temple VI (Temple of Inscriptions). The name of the ruler who may have succeeded Ruler B and preceded Ruler C is recorded at 12-J2. (After Jones 1977.)



8
Tikal, Temple V as seen with a 200 mm lens from Temple I.

known from Maya inscriptions. Rulers often proclaim their own glorification at the same time they honor and name their parents. The importance of family relations is also indicated in the pairing of Temples I and II directly across the plaza from one another, husband and wife through eternity.

Family Relationships in Other Media

Other media indicate that this pattern of preserving family relations was widespread among the Classic Maya. Parentage statements characteristically close Classic Maya texts. As Jones has demonstrated (1977), both Rulers A and B of Tikal record parentage statements in which they refer first to female parent and then to male parent. Hieroglyphically, each ruler seeks to

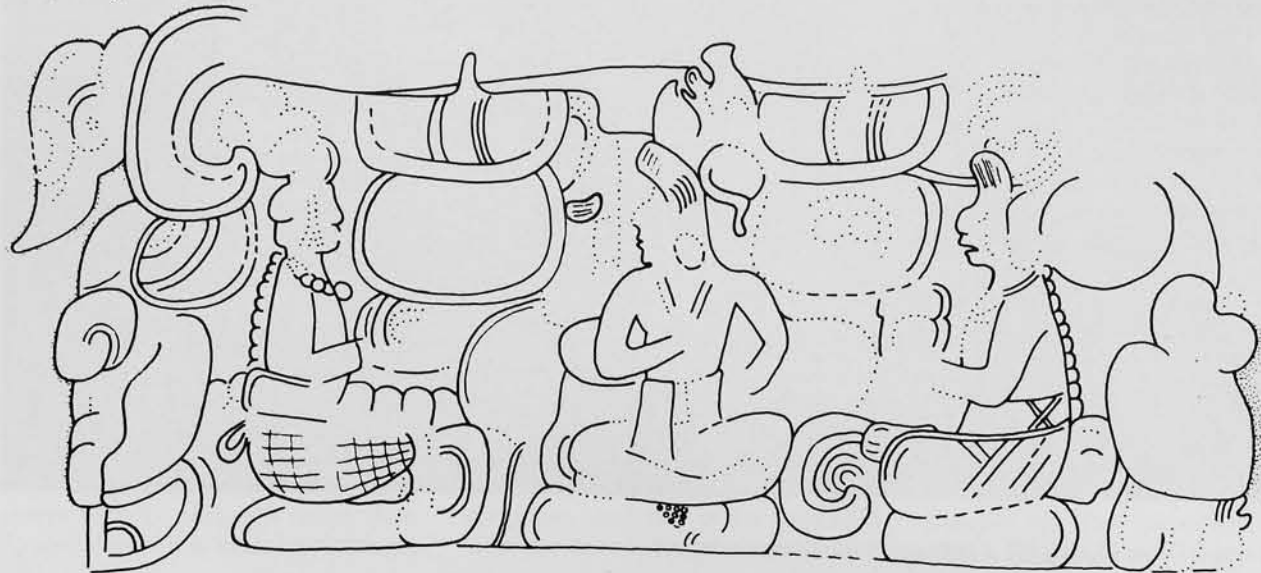
9

The Dumbarton Oaks panel. King Kan-Xul, at his transformation in the afterlife, is framed by his parents, King Pacal, right, and Lady Ahpo-Hel, left. (By Linda Schele.)



10

*Caracol Stela 14, detail. These three figures, framed by a Cauac monster behind them, form the throne of the newly installed king, who sits above them. The new king himself may be represented as the center figure, receiving offerings from dead parents. (After C. Beetz, 1981, *The Monuments and Inscriptions of Caracol, Belize*, Fig. 14. Philadelphia: The University Museum.)*



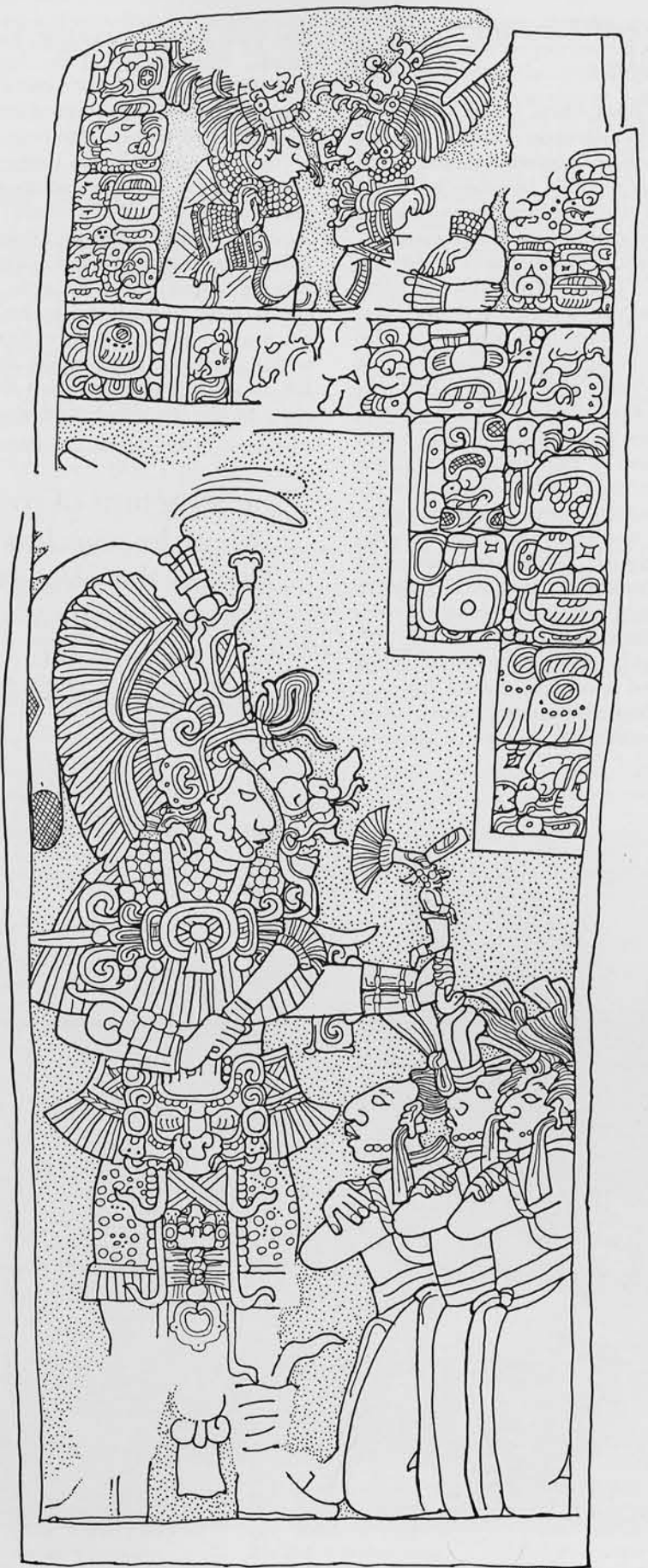
frame himself within a statement of his lineage. Ruler BC uses the same parentage statement as does Ruler C, showing that they have the same parents. This pattern of making parentage statements in hieroglyphic inscriptions was not limited to the Tikal dynasty: it can now be documented at most Classic Maya sites with extensive inscriptions.

This arrangement of the ruler framed by his parents is even clearer in figural sculpture, although not in the conservative public Late Classic art of Tikal, which depicts the ruler alone. Frontally positioned rulers sit between deceased parents in profile to either side on a series of Late Classic Palenque sculptures. Even when honored posthumously, as the Palenque ruler Kan-Xul is on the Dumbarton Oaks panel, the king is framed by his parents, who are identified by captions (Fig. 9). We may see the earliest version of this arrangement on Caracol Stela 14, although the individuals are not named (Fig. 10).

At Yaxchilan, the homage to family blood lines was depicted in a different manner (Fig. 11). Tatiana Proskouriakoff first noted that references to previous rulers and their consorts were cast in the upper registers of several stelae at this Maya center (Proskouriakoff 1963, 1964). These figures can be identified by their accompanying texts, and within this upper margin, they also frame the ruler. On the front of Stela 11, Shield Jaguar and one of his wives sit directly over Bird Jaguar, who stands below, celebrating his accession. There can also be little doubt that the parents are dead, since they sit above astronomical symbols, as if to signify their position in the heavens. Even after apotheosis, the two parents are cited by their child as his own references. On the rear of Stela 11 (Fig. 11), they appear to confer over his progress as a warrior, shown below.

11

Yaxchilan Stela 11. Bird Jaguar's mother, left, confers with the late Shield Jaguar, right, while Bird Jaguar, below, presides over three captives. (By Linda Schele.)



A Royal Lineage at Tikal

It is clear, then, that living rulers seek to interpose themselves between their deceased parents, or, at the very least, beside their deceased sire, as sometimes occurs in the inscriptions (we can consider the case of Tikal Ruler C, for example, in the inscription of Stela 24, who names only his father), and in the extant sculpture (cf. the Cross Group Tablets, Palenque). It is precisely this pattern that explains the placement of the giant funerary pyramids at Tikal. From the tomb at the base of the structure to the transformation seen on the lintels, these pyramids personify and commemorate specific individuals. Later attendance at these buildings can only have been a form of ancestor worship. As related to specific individuals, the pyramids appear to have been grouped according to the lines of genealogical descent. Since they are posthumous, we must assume

that their design, including, for example, the carving of the lintels, was carried out either before the death of the commemorated lord or through the efforts of the heirs.

Ruler A and his wife were thus set on the Great Plaza to frame the ancestors and to be, in turn, the ancestral couple (Fig. 5). Ruler B wished to place himself with his parents, Ruler A and his wife. We can imagine Ruler B during his lifetime sitting on a palace throne within the Central Acropolis, facing left to see his mother, then facing right to see his father, and straight

“the structure of royal Maya lineage lies behind the elegant arrangement of monumental architecture at Tikal”

ahead to see all their predecessors. And, after his death, Ruler B's pyramid, Temple IV, was arranged to keep both Temples I and II within his line of sight (Fig. 12). He did this in such a fashion that Temple IV seems to be in dialogue with Temple I, the smaller Temple II deferring to them. One might consider Temple IV, with its imposing size and height, a visual threat to Temple I, but in its distance from the Great Plaza, Temple IV shows reverence. Temple IV addresses rather than challenges Temple I; if it were meant to threaten, it probably would have been set closer and perhaps directly behind Temple I. It is also appropriate that Temple VI, dedicated to a lesser lord, plays a minor visual role in comparison to Temples I and IV.

Ruler C's inscriptions refer mainly to his father, and so it is appropriate that his pyramid be placed under the sheltering shadow of Temple IV (Fig. 12). The view from Temple III encompasses Temples I and II, as if Ruler C

makes those temples his primary reference. Here too an analogy can be drawn with hieroglyphic inscriptions. A similar pattern was followed by the last Palenque ruler, Kuk. In recording the occasion of his own installation in office on the Tablet of the 96 Glyphs, he first drew attention to his relationship with the founder of the Late Classic dynasty, Pacal, before he named his own sire. Tikal Temple III indicates a relationship to Temples I and II as well as to Temple IV. Ruler C has set himself within the bosom of the dynasty.

Given the placement of Temples III and IV with regard to Temple I, we should reconsider the identity of the ruler commemorated in Temple V (Fig. 6). It seems quite clear that a king of Tikal must be buried in this pyramid, a member of the direct lineage that produced Rulers A, B, and C. The most important references for this pyramid are Temples I and II, Ruler A and his wife (Fig. 5 is the panorama from the superstructure of Temple V). In scale, Temple V is nearly as impressive as Temple IV. According to the list of Late Classic Tikal rulers, “hel” numbers and the dates associated with their reigns, the surviving inscriptions leave gaps between Rulers A and B and between B and C (Jones 1977; Jones and Satterthwaite 1982). The gap between B and C has been filled with BC. It now seems likely that a first child of Ruler A may also have ruled, and we might call him AB. His funerary pyramid is probably Temple V. He was the ruler of Tikal best able to choose an advantageous position in relation to Temples I and II, his memorialized parents. By placement alone, Temple V suggests that it belongs to the first son of Ruler A.

Throughout the century during which these pyramids were built, none was allowed to obstruct the view of the front elevation of Temple I. Despite the great number of these constructions, not one interferes with the most important one. All others only revere and imitate Temple I, to whom all successors look. The fact that this pattern of erecting funerary pyramids dedicated to the most important figures of the Late Classic dynasty

also ended with Ruler C might suggest a change of lineage at that point.

Tozzer and the Tikal Temples

Charles Bowditch sent A. M. Tozzer to Tikal in 1908 to finish the archaeological study that Teobert Maler had refused to submit to the Peabody Museum. Tozzer studied the great pyramids, and he noted that “the temples of Tikal seem to be more correctly oriented than the structures of any other of the Maya sites” (Tozzer 1911:105). The basis

of that orientation was not apparent to Tozzer, but he perceived a relationship among the buildings. The organization of temples at Tikal can now be understood to embody the development of the dynasty, repeating patterns well established epigraphically throughout the Maya realm and frequently represented in the figural art of Palenque and Yaxchilan. At first glance, Tikal's laconic art may seem pallid when compared with the complex visual imagery of the Usumacinta region, but in fact the structure of royal Maya lineage lies behind the elegant arrangement of monumental architecture at Tikal just as it does in other media elsewhere. **Z**

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Mary Ellen Miller received her A.B. from Princeton in 1975. She received a Ph.D. in the History of Art in 1981 from Yale, where she now holds the post of Associate Professor of History of Art. Professor Miller has worked extensively in Central America, particularly Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras, where she has carried out research in Maya art and architecture. She is the author of *The Art of Mesoamerica: from Olmec to Aztec*

(Thames and Hudson, 1986) and *The Murals of Bonampak* (Princeton University Press, 1986). With Linda Schele of the University of Texas, she is guest co-curator of *The Blood of Kings: a New Interpretation of Maya Art*, which will open at the Kimball Art Museum in May 1986. Professors Schele and Miller have also written a book, *The Blood of Kings*, to accompany the exhibition. [The photograph of Miller is by Justin Kerr.]

