

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'inich, son of Yax K'uk' Mo'. The Xukpi Stone, one of ECAP's recent finds (see Sedat, this issue), records that Popol K'inich dedicated a tomb to his father around AD 437.



Fig. 1a.



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'inich 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

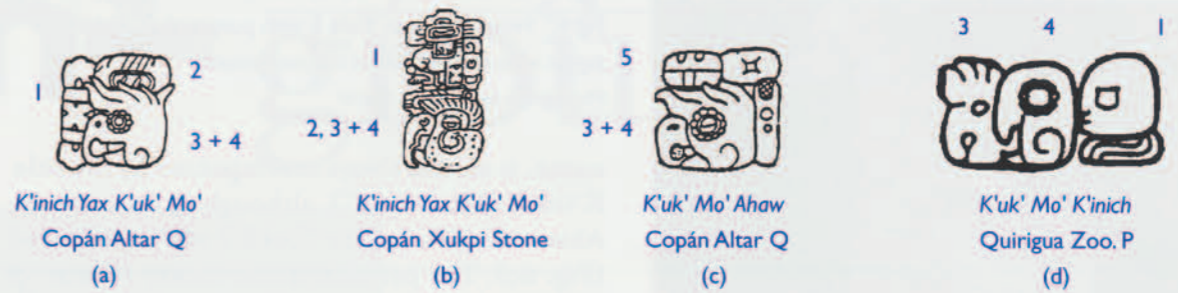


Fig. 2. Name glyphs of Yax K'uk' Mo' (1=K'inich, 2=Yax, 3=K'uk', 4=Mo', 5=Ahaw). Sometimes yax was omitted.

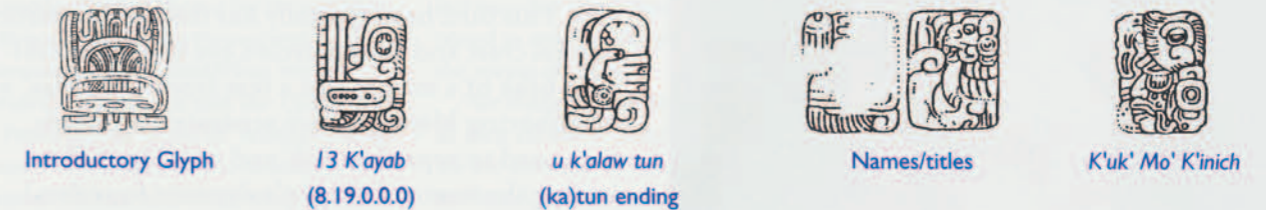


Fig. 3. The 8.19.0.0.0 Period Ending (March 25, 416) on Copán Stela 15, dedicated by Water Lily Jaguar.



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.



Fig. 6. Front of Copán Stele E with portrayal of Water Lily Jaguar, who commissioned the monument.

Photograph by Robert J. Sharer

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'inich (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 11), Smoke Imix God K (Ruler 12), and 18 Rabbit (Ruler 13).

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). *Yax K'uk' Mo'*, his personal

name, is almost always accompanied by the title K'inich ("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 (*k'uk'*) and macaw (*mo'*) 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 *k'uk'* and *mo'* [Fig. 2d] in writing the name of Copán's dynastic founder.)

The earliest dated event attributed to Yax K'uk' Mo' is the 8.19.0.0.0 (March 25, 416) Period Ending, recorded on Copán Stela 15 (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 traumas 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



5 Kaban 15 Yaxk'in
8.19.10.10.17



i tal
and then
he came



Ch'okte Na
(to) Sprout
Tree House



8 Ahaw 18 Yaxk'in
8.19.10.11.0



u tz'apaw
he set up



tun
stone



u k'al ox (?)
he finished three



Yol
early Quirigua ruler



Tok'



U kabhi
He caused it



?
Title



K'uk' Mo' K'inich



Kalomte
Title



Xukpi Ahaw
Copán Lord

Fig. 7. Founding events involving Yax K'uk' Mo' in the text on Quirigua Zoomorph P, dedicated on 9.18.5.0.0 (Sept. 15, 795) by a late Quirigua ruler.



Kimiy
He died



?



K'uk' Mo'
K'inich



Lahka Tz'akbul
12th successor of



Wuk ?
7-Title



K'inich Ahaw
Sun-eyed Lord

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



K'inich



Yax K'uk' Mo'



Ochk'in Kalomte
West Kalomte

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



6 Ahaw 13 K'ayab
9.17.5.0.0
(Dec. 29, 775)



t'abay
it was ascended,
it was finished



yakuch ?
the altar of



K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'

Fig. 10. Dedication statement for Copán Altar Q.

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. 5). 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'inich 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 Tok', 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'inich), 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'inich on 9.0.2.0.0 (Nov. 30, 437). Presum-

Maya Calendrical Dates

The Maya kept track of absolute time in *bak'tuns* (ca. 400 years each), *k'atuns* (ca. 20 years each), *tuns* (ca. one year each), *winals* (20 days each), and *k'ins* (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 size 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 *k'atuns*, 8 *tuns*, 2 *winals*, and 1 day (*k'in*) after the creation date of August 13, 3114 BC

The completions of 5, 10, and 15 *tun* periods, and the completions of *k'atuns* 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 *k'atun* ending (the 19th).



Ock k'ak'
Fire entered



K'ul Xup' Nah
The Divine Copán House



yotot
the house of



K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'



K'u



Mo'

Fig. 12. The name K'u Mo' on Hombre de Tikal.

Drawing by Rene Ozbeta


Fig. 11. Fire-dedication of a building under Copán Temple II.

ably 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 2nd ruler, Popol K'inich. There are also numbered successor statements connecting later rulers to Yax K'uk' Mo'. 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'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'" (Fig. 10), and an early structure under Copán Temple II, dedicated by Moon Jaguar (Ruler 10), has a fire-dedication statement naming the temple "The House of K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'" (Fig. 11).

As noted in an accompanying article (see Sharer), Yax K'uk' Mo' was probably not a na-

tive 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 *K'u 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

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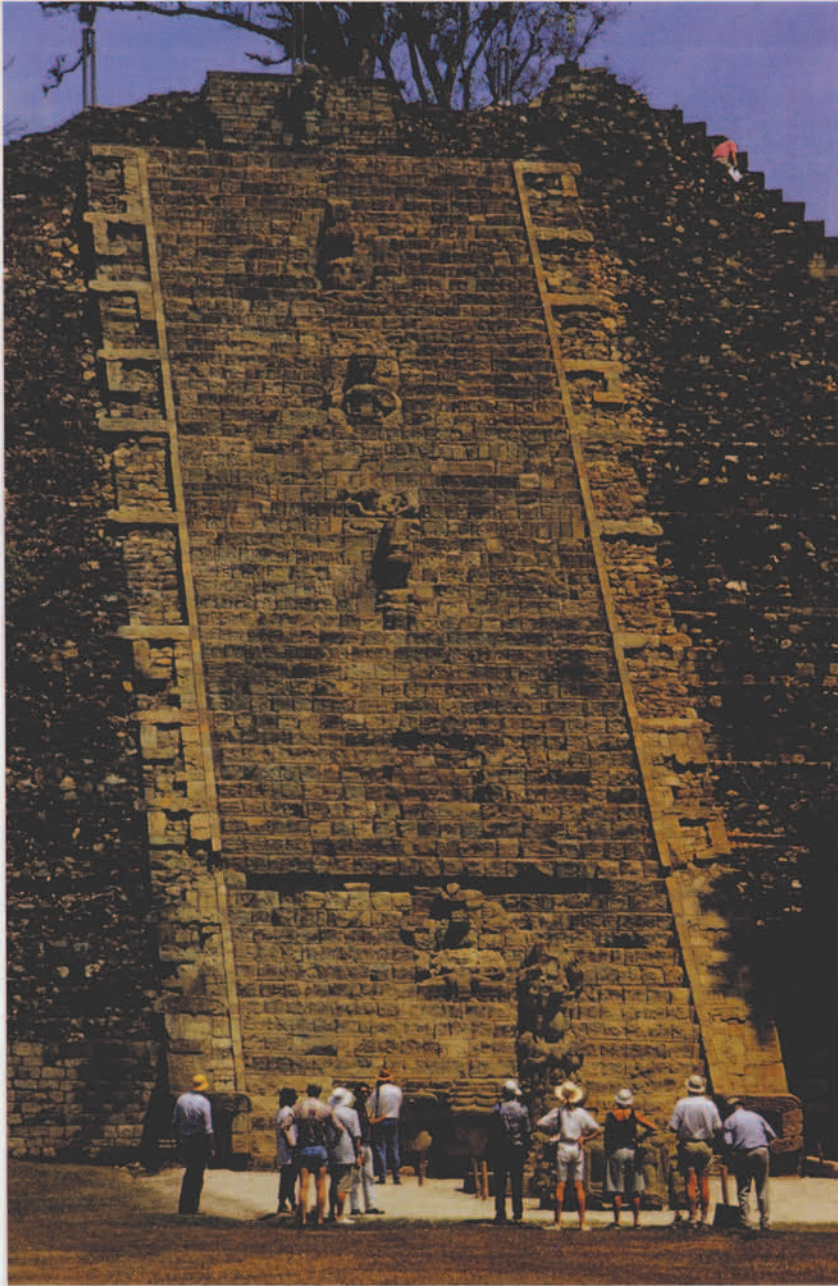


Fig. 13. The famous Hieroglyphic Staircase, located on the west side of Temple 26. This is one of the longest hieroglyphic inscriptions in the Maya area. It details the history of Copán's ruling dynasty.

Photograph by Lynn A. Grant



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