



Research Article

The rise, expansion, and endurance of *Kaanul*: The view from northwestern Peten

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Abstract

The ancient Maya political landscape was permeated by regional systems of political asymmetry. These hegemonic networks fluctuated through time, but the steady presence of a few especially dominant polities shows that they were a persistent feature with very real sociopolitical effects. Based on research carried out at the sites of La Corona and Achiotal, and epigraphic studies in many other sites in the Maya Central Lowlands, we offer a general interpretation of the historical and sociopolitical development of one of these hegemonic polities: the *Kaanul* dynasty. Combining epigraphic and archaeological data, we discuss the Early Classic political landscape in the northern Peten region (“Chatahn” *Winik*, *Suutz’*, and *Sak Wahyis*), as well as the development and maintenance of political relations with the *Kaanul* dynasty for over two centuries. These data allow us to suggest that the northwestern Peten was not only a strategic point for the initial expansion of the *Kaanul* dynasty in the sixth century A.D., but also an important lynchpin for the maintenance of its hegemonic control in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. We suggest that epigraphic and archaeological data of the northern Peten from the Classic period help to illuminate how a unique regional hegemony over the Maya Lowlands was achieved and maintained.

Resumen

El paisaje geopolítico de las tierras bajas mayas durante el período clásico se caracterizó por sistemas regionales de asimetría política. Estos sistemas fluctuaron a lo largo del tiempo, pero algunas entidades fueron más estables y dominantes en períodos considerables, por lo que causaron efectos sociopolíticos en toda la región. Con base en las investigaciones llevadas a cabo en La Corona y Achiotal, así como datos epigráficos de otros sitios de las tierras bajas mayas, se ha reconstruido el desarrollo histórico y sociopolítico de la dinastía *Kaanul* del período clásico, que se identificó por un glifo emblema cuyo signo principal fue una cabeza de serpiente.

A pesar de que se ha propuesto que los *Kaanul* tuvieron su primera sede dinástica en la región de El Mirador durante el período preclásico, dichas evidencias son ambiguas y todas pertenecen al período clásico. Además, según las evidencias más recientes, se considera que la sede original de dicha dinastía fue Dzibanché, cuyo nombre original fue *Kaanul*. Combinando datos epigráficos y arqueológicos, también se discute la presencia de varias entidades políticas en la región noroccidental de Petén a inicios del clásico temprano: “Chatahn” *Winik*, *Suutz’*, y *Sak Wahyis*. Se propone que “Chatahn” fue el nombre de un lugar o entidad política que abarcaba la región entre Calakmul, El Mirador y Achiotal, la que fue parcialmente controlada por los *Suutz’* en el siglo cuarto. Por otro lado, también se propone que *Sak Wahyis* identificó los gobernantes de la entidad política centrada en *Sak Nikte’*, hoy conocida como La Corona.

Durante el siglo quinto, la dinastía *Kaanul* inició una serie de conquistas y alianzas que culminó en el establecimiento de una relación muy cercana con los *Sak Wahyis*, la cual duró más de dos siglos. De igual forma, los *Kaanul* coexistieron con los “Chatahn” *Winik* y *Suutz’* en Calakmul y toda la región norte de Petén, creando así un régimen político novedoso y exitoso, que desarrolló una forma de coerción pasiva que incluyó diversas formas de relaciones políticas.

Los datos de La Corona indican que el noroccidente de Petén fue un punto estratégico para la expansión inicial de *Kaanul* y clave para mantener el control hegemónico de un área extensa en los siglos séptimo y octavo. Sitios “menores”, “secundarios” o “satélites” como La Corona permitieron conectar físicamente todo el territorio a través de una red de caminos, pero también fueron unificados ideológicamente, a través de un conjunto de identidades políticas heterogéneas. Los *Kaanul* permitieron,

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incorporaron e incluso dependieron de una autonomía preexistente en cada región. Por lo tanto, el estado hegemónico *Kaanul*, especialmente el desarrollado por *Yuknoom Ch'een II*, fue una acumulación de componentes políticos, económicos, religiosos y sociales de las regiones conquistadas y absorbidas, lo cual se expresó en estrategias de subsistencia, prácticas y creencias religiosas, relaciones de parentesco e instituciones políticas.

The *Kaanul* phenomenon in ancient Maya geopolitics

Since the initial discovery of emblem glyphs by Berlin (1958) more than six decades ago, a new specialty in Maya research emerged: the study of Classic period geopolitics. This focus has combined epigraphic, iconographic, and archaeological data to understand the nature, extent, and dynamism of the Lowland Maya political landscape between the second and ninth centuries A.D. Central to this process has been the identification of “emblem glyphs” in inscriptions, which today we understand to be the title *K'uhul Ajaw*. Not only are they related to specific archaeological sites or regions, but they also act as nominal referents, group identifiers, or even political ethnonyms when referring to particular places, lineages, social units, or mythological locations.

The “Snake head” (*Kaanul*) emblem glyph, associated with Calakmul and Dzibanche, has appeared across more than 35 Lowland Maya sites and is related to a far-flung network of Classic period polities. The study of the *Kaanul* political entity has involved a broad interdisciplinary effort, compiling data from more than ten independent archaeological projects, as well as its interpretation by a large number of archaeologists, epigraphists, art historians, and other specialists.

As we come to grips with the proverbial elephant in the room, we are increasingly capable of recognizing how *Kaanul* represents a complex and historically contingent political phenomenon rather than an archetype of the “Classic Maya polity” (Canuto and Barrientos Q. 2020:171–173; see also Martin 2020:309–311; Martin and Velásquez 2016). Its extensive geographical distribution, as well as its consistently asymmetrical relationship with multiple polities, made it the most successful expansionist and hegemonic Classic period regime of the Central Maya Lowlands (see Martin 2024). To describe and partly explain the impact of this singular expansionism and hegemony, we focus on data related to the north and northwestern zones of Peten, Guatemala, where the Proyecto Regional Arqueológico La Corona (PRALC) has been investigating since 2008 and where we find the earliest evidence of *Kaanul*'s expansionist agenda.

The Snake-head emblem glyph and El Mirador

To understand *Kaanul*'s expansion into northwestern Peten, we must first understand the geopolitics of the Northern Central Lowlands in the fourth and fifth centuries. While we know now that *Kaanul* had its origins in the southern Quintana Roo area, we also have evidence of other contemporary political entities: “Chatahn” *Winik*, *Suutz'*, and the enigmatic *Sak Wahyis*. These political “players,” whose importance waned in the Late Classic, were primary movers in this region before the rise of *Kaanul*.

Before delving into the Early Classic political arena of northern Peten, we must address the hypothesis associating the origins of *Kaanul* with the Preclassic sites of El Mirador, Nakbe, or Tintal (Guenter and Hansen 2019; Hansen 2016a:25). When this idea of El Mirador being the original seat of the *Kaanul* dynasty was first proposed 20 years ago (Guenter 2000, 2002), Calakmul was still considered its only Classic period capital. It was thus feasible that a dynastic seat could have shifted location once within the same geographic region. However, after the identification of Dzibanche as *Kaanul*'s Early Classic dynastic seat a few years later (Nalda 2004; Velásquez 2005), the plausibility that the seat of the same dynasty could have shifted twice and across large distances each time declined.

The main evidence used for the “Mirador hypothesis” are the 12 to 17 codex-style vessels known as the “Dynastic Vases,” dated between A.D. 670 and A.D. 740, which record lists of various rulers associated with the Snake Emblem Glyph (Martin 1997, 2017a; Mumary 2016). These vessels are claimed (1) to have been made exclusively in Nakbe or in El Mirador region (Guenter and Hansen 2019; Hansen et al. 1991), and (2) to refer to *Kaanul* rulers at El Mirador from 392 B.C. to A.D. 129 (Guenter 2000:12).

There are problems with this interpretation. First, although chemical signatures suggest that some dynastic vases were produced at Nakbe (Boucher and Palomo 2012:126), not a single dynastic vase fragment has been found at Nakbe or any other site in the El Mirador region. Moreover, since some dynastic vase sherds have been found in Calakmul (Martin 2020:140) and none of the complete vessels has been recovered in their original archaeological context, we cannot discard the possibility that they were made in Calakmul, where high numbers of codex-style sherds and complete vessels have been recovered (Boucher and Palomo 2012; García 2011). Second, during the Late Classic, Nakbe was occupied by a dispersed population living among the ruins of the Preclassic center, likely under *Kaanul*'s patronage (Boucher and Palomo 2012:127; Forsyth 2002:667; Morales 2021). Third, the correlation between the king lists on these vases and the dynastic sequence of Early Classic Dzibanche is becoming increasingly robust (Martin 2017a; see Martin 2024). In any case, these king lists and the codex-style vessels, in general, were commissioned by the *Kaanul* rulers based at Calakmul, to reaffirm not only their dynastic ties with the Early Classic kings, but also their links with characters and places of mythological symbolism (Mumary 2016; Nalda and Balanzario 2014:200–202; Vázquez López et al. 2016:1103; Velásquez and García 2018:5–6, 13; see Velásquez and Balanzario 2024).

The second argument focuses on the sign known as the “S-snake,” which Guenter has proposed as a variant of the Snake-head emblem glyph (Guenter 2002; Guenter and

Hansen 2019). Three examples of this glyph are known, two of which supposedly point to Tintal as the site of their origin. One is incised in a greenstone object found in Tintal Burial 1, dated to the beginning of the Early Classic (Hansen 2016b:407–408). The second appears in the text of the Hauberg Stela, dated to A.D. 408, which informants claim was looted from Tintal (Guenter 2002). The third example is located on Tikal Stela 5, dating to the Late Classic, which directly associates this foreign emblem with the ruling family in Tikal. This association would seem implausible given the rivalry between Tikal and the Kaanul dynasty at that time. In any case, the “S-snake” glyph and the Kaanul emblem glyph are fundamentally different signs (see Zender 2021) and likely related to a larger northern Peten polity during the Classic, but not Kaanul (Mumary 2019:49–53).

The third argument involves the petroglyph from La Muerta, located in El Mirador’s periphery. This carving contains a text ending with a glyph resembling that of Kaanul (Hansen 2016b:410; Suyuc et al. 2005); nevertheless, the carving is far too eroded to be considered incontrovertible proof of a true emblem glyph (see Zender 2021). Furthermore, since the text has been dated stylistically to the fourth or fifth century A.D. (Anaya and Guenter 2008:217; García 2009:43–50; Morales and Mauricio 2006:28; Velásquez and García 2018:4) and La Muerta was occupied mainly during the Classic period, this carving does not constitute direct proof of a Preclassic Kaanul. Actually, the recent identification of the “Chatahn” *Winik* title in its text (Velásquez and García 2018:5–6) suggests an alternative interpretation, to be discussed later.

To conclude, we suggest that:

- (1) There are no *in situ* Preclassic texts with the Kaanul emblem glyph in the El Mirador region, and the examples proposed as evidence date to the Classic period and are epigraphically ambiguous. Besides, the fact that Kaanul seems to be the toponym for Dzibanche discards most doubt that Dzibanche was not its place of origin (Martin and Velásquez 2016; see Velásquez and Balanzario 2024).
- (2) We should avoid “retrofitting” the Classic period political system onto Late Preclassic sites, because Preclassic geopolitics are unknown and probably different from those of the Classic period.
- (3) Published archaeological data indicate that the El Mirador region suffered a collapse and abandonment in the mid-second century A.D. (Hansen 2016a:21–24), contradicting the idea of dynastic continuity at Tintal or La Muerta during the first half of the Early Classic. Given this scenario, it is more feasible that the Kaanul presence in that region arrived during the Classic period, after such collapse.

By discarding the notion of a Preclassic Kaanul in the El Mirador region, we can now turn to the Early Classic in the northern Peten region. In so doing, we consider the roles and interactions of three known political players of the time period—the “Chatahn” *Winik*, the Bat-head (*Suutz*)

polity, and the enigmatic *Sak Wahyis*—to help explain Kaanul’s eventual hegemony over the northwestern Peten.

“Chatahn” *Winik* and Achiotal

The “Chatahn” *Winik* title, which has been documented only in northern Peten and southern Campeche (Boot 2005; García and Velásquez 2016; Grube 2004, 2008; Mumary 2019:133–135; Velásquez and García 2018), has been identified mainly in the texts of codex-style vessels (García 2011; Lopes 2004) and inscriptions at Calakmul (Vázquez López 2014:139; Vázquez López et al. 2016:1103) and other nearby sites like Uxul (Grube 2008; Grube et al. 2012:21; Vázquez López 2019:248). It is important to note that the “Chatahn” is probably not the actual reading of the title. Even though the initial glyphic sign resembles the syllable *cha* from other contexts, it seems more likely that it is a logogram of unknown value. So, the current state of knowledge would suggest that this title be read as “?-tahn”; for the purposes of this article, we will refer to it as “Chatahn” *Winik*.

Most epigraphers do agree that “Chatahn” *Winik* refers to a politically salient group, title, identity, or concept centered somewhere in northern Peten and southern Campeche at the beginning of the Classic period (Valencia and Esparza 2014:38; Vázquez López 2017:33; Velásquez 2008:330). Data suggest that “Chatahn” could be the ancient toponym of a place or the ethnonym of a group (Boot 2005; Grube 2004:122; Martin 2005; Martin et al. 2015; Velásquez and García 2018). If so, “Chatahn” *Winik* could have meant “person of ‘Chatahn,’” thus referring to a population based in the broader Calakmul–Mirador region long before the Kaanul hegemony developed. In any case, it is important to underscore that the relationship between this title and the *K’uhul Ajaw* remains unclear.

After the Late Preclassic demise and abandonment of El Mirador, Calakmul developed into an important political center. Calakmul Stela 43, dated to A.D. 514 (Martin 2005:6; Vázquez López et al. 2016:1102–1103), suggests that the “Chatahn” were present, if not centered, there at this time. This early reference to a “Chatahn” *Winik* at Calakmul may explain why, despite Kaanul’s eventual hegemony in this area, the “Chatahn” *Winik* title remained in use at Calakmul (and at other nearby sites, such as Nakbe and Uxul), even if only to identify people subordinate to a *K’uhul Ajaw* (Vázquez López 2017:33; Vázquez López et al. 2016:1104; Velásquez and García 2018:25).

While the identity and domain of the “Chatahn” *Winik* remain elusive, recent research at the site of Achiotal provides some new clues. A site of modest dimensions, Achiotal is located in the northwest Peten region of Guatemala, on the western margins of the karstic uplands of the central Peten. The site itself is situated on a natural hill surrounded by seasonally flooded *bajos*, possibly for defensive purposes (Figure 1). Investigations carried out between 2009 and 2019 by PRALC indicate that its occupation dates to the Late Preclassic and extends to the Late Classic, though its apogee dates mainly to the Terminal Preclassic and the beginning of the Early Classic (Arredondo et al. 2018).

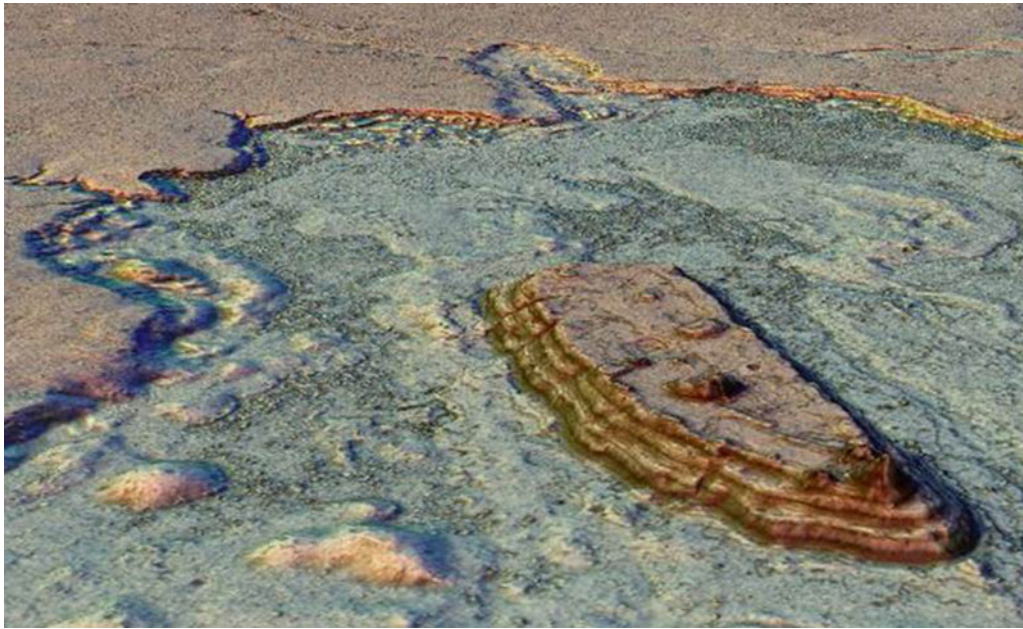


Figure 1. LiDAR-based digital elevation model of the Achiotal site and its surrounding geography. Image by Luke Auld-Thomas, PRALC.

Achiotal Structure 5C-8 was located in front of the massive pyramidal Structure 5C-1 that dominates the entire site. Despite being heavily looted, excavations along its central axis revealed a small shrine where a fragment and base of Stela 1 were recovered. The relief of the stela fragment and its back-side inscription were well-preserved (Figure 2). The front side of the stela shows a ruler with an elaborate headdress, holding a two-headed serpent ceremonial bar in both arms, carved in a style comparable to

other Early Classic monuments. The inscription on its back starts with a tzolkin date of 7 *Eb*, followed by the G9 glyph and what has been interpreted as a haab date of 10 *Sak*. The 7 *Eb* 10 *Sak* calendar-round date would most likely correspond to 8.19.2.12.2 (November 20, A.D. 418). The inscription continues by noting that the protagonist had been ruler of two *katuns*, suggesting he rose to power in A.D. 379. This accession would place him on the throne only one year after the famous “entrada” of *Siyaj K’ahk* to



Figure 2. Achiotal Stela I, front and back side. Photographs by Luke Auld-Thomas, PRALC.

the Peten, an event that led to the imposition of a new political order at Tikal and nearby centers, such as El Perú-Waka', Naachtun, Uaxactun, Yaxha, and La Sufricaya (Canuto et al. 2019; Estrada-Belli et al. 2009; Freidel and Escobedo 2006; Kovac and Barrois 2013; Nondédéo et al. 2019; Stuart 2000, 2014).

Excavations in Structure 5C-8 also revealed that it was a funerary temple, containing a large fine-masonry mortuary chamber which had been completely destroyed and emptied by looters. Within the looter's debris around the chamber, an intact laurel leaf-shaped knife made of Pachuca obsidian was recovered; this type of object has only been found in Uaxactun and Pacbitun (Spence 1996:29, 33). It would thus appear that this foreign-made prestige item was gifted to the ruler of Achiotal from someone associated with the Teotihuacan "entrada" in the late fourth century A.D. If we presume that the main personage on Stela 1 was buried in this tomb and that one of his possessions was this knife, we suggest the "entrada" and its regional impacts were relevant to this individual's accession to the Achiotal throne.

What is most curious however, is that the Stela 1 protagonist is identified not only as the grandson of a "Chatahn" *Winik*, but also as one of five vassals (*yajaw*) placed on thrones in the wake of the "entrada." It would thus appear that this pedigreed Achiotal ruler played a sufficiently salient role in events during the "entrada" to have earned a position of power for himself. Given the site's strategic location between El Perú-Waka', Tikal, and Naachtun, his importance seems plausible (Canuto et al. 2019). Although it remains unclear precisely to whom he owed loyalty, his "Chatahn" *Winik* pedigree suggests to us that his allegiance would have been to polities in northern Peten, such as Calakmul or Naachtun, whose own alliance with *Siyaj K'ahk'* spared it the punitive warfare that the "entrada" brought to wayward Tikal-allied polities farther south.

At some point after this stela's original dedication and use, it was broken into at least three pieces. At the end of the Early Classic, the monument fragments were placed inside a masonry chamber. Later on, two additional west-facing chambers were added, each associated with different dedicatory offerings. The entire three-chambered shrine was terminated by a large ceramic deposit spread over the inner room floor that included at least 26 partial or complete vessels. Among these was one codex-style vase suggesting a post-A.D. 670 date for this termination event. The codex-style vessel was thus deposited—and maybe intentionally broken—as part of a long tradition of offerings dedicated to the "Chatahn" *Winik* ancestor portrayed in Stela 1 (for more details, see Barrientos Q. et al. 2016; Canuto et al. 2019).

This context suggests that this particular individual remained important for at least three centuries. Moreover, if the "Chatahn" *Winik* of Early Classic Calakmul texts and Late Classic codex-style vessels point to an association with the Calakmul-Mirador region, especially during Calakmul's apogee in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. (Martin et al. 2015; Vázquez López et al. 2016:1103; Velásquez and García 2018:15, 25), its appearance in Achiotal at the beginning of the fifth century A.D. (or even

before), is not only the earliest reference of a "Chatahn" *Winik* of known context and provenience, but also indicates that its reach and influence was wider than previously thought (Velásquez and García 2018:5–7, 24).

The rise of the Suutz' polity

Naachtun emerged after the collapse of El Mirador as the Suutz' polity, identified by a bat-head emblem glyph (Nondédéo et al. 2015:116–117, 2019:55). It appears in Calakmul (Martin 2005; Mumary 2019:72; Vázquez López 2017:33; Velásquez and García 2018) and other nearby sites, like Oxpemul (Grube 2005, 2008; Martin 2005), Uxul (Grube et al. 2012), and possibly Balakbal (Martin 2005:7). Recent research suggests that after a light Preclassic occupation, major occupation at Naachtun starts around A.D. 150–350. During this period, its ceramics are affiliated with those of El Mirador (Nondédéo et al. 2015:116), suggesting a possible migration after the latter's abandonment.

Naachtun Stela 23 names a Suutz' ruler in A.D. 361, and Stela 24 mentions another ruler who is subordinated to *Siyaj K'ahk'* (Nondédéo et al. 2015:116–117, 2016:61–63, 2019:55–64) during his "entrada" in A.D. 378. It thus appears that Suutz' became the most prominent power in northern Peten at the beginning of the Early Classic, aided in large part by its participation in the Teotihuacan "entrada," making it an important ally of Tikal, and nearby Río Azul, probably through marriage alliances (Nondédéo et al. 2019:67–68). Their dominance extended over Calakmul from the beginning of the fifth century A.D., as evidenced in Stela 114, dated to A.D. 435, where the portrayed ruler carries the Suutz' emblem glyph as his main title (Martin 2005:9). If Naachtun was the seat of the Suutz' dynasty, its presence at Calakmul would suggest a hegemony over the "Chatahn" *Winik*. However, the portrait of a "Chatahn" *Winik* in Calakmul Stela 43 in the early sixth century A.D. suggests that both political entities may have found ways to coexist (Valencia and Esparza 2018:60). However large and powerful it might have become, it is nonetheless clear that *Kaanul's* expansionist aspirations would have eventually compelled it to contend with this particular political regime.

Sak Wahyis and Sak Nikte'

Contemporary and related to "Chatahn" *Winik* is another title of northern Peten cities: *Sak Wahyis*. Its earliest appearance is in Early Classic La Corona, a site whose original name was *Sak Nikte'* and, according to epigraphic and archaeological data, was founded in the mid-fourth century as a center of modest scale (Stuart et al. 2014:436). This title appears in other sites, such as El Zotz (Carter 2015:12), Uxul (Grube and Esparza 2017:5; Grube et al. 2012:21–23), and El Perú-Waka' (Navarro-Farr et al. 2020; Pérez et al. 2014:118), as well in codex-style vessels (Velásquez and García 2018). However, it was prominent at La Corona during all its dynastic history and as early as the fifth century A.D., suggesting it originated either there (Vázquez López and Kupprat 2018:96) or in a broader region that included Uxul (Grube 2013; Grube and Esparza 2017:5; Grube et al.

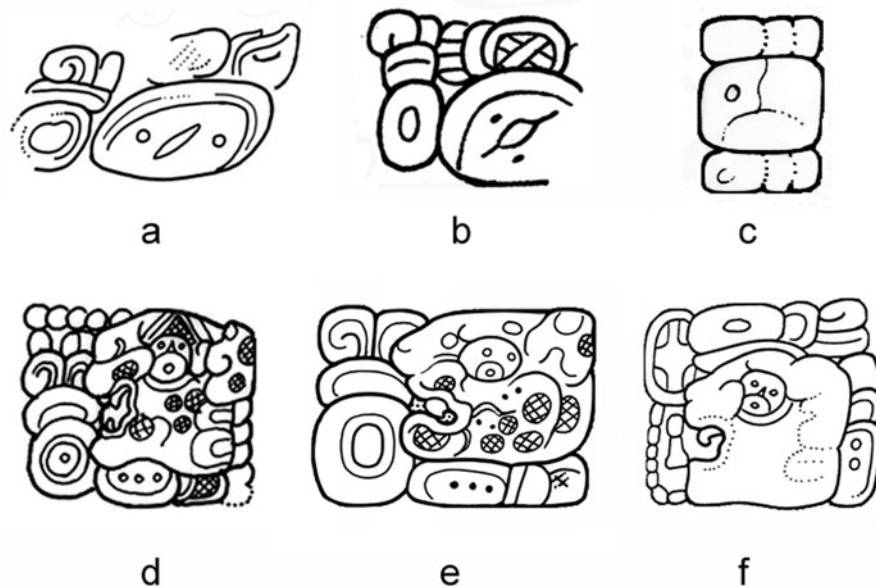


Figure 3. Different versions of the *Sak Wahyis* glyph from La Corona inscriptions: (a) Altar 5; (b) Panel 1; (c) Panel 6; (d) Element 3 (*K'uhul Sak Wahyis*); (e) Element 56; (f) Element 33 (*K'uhul Sak Wahyis*). (a–c, e, f) Drawings by Stuart; (d) drawing by Linda Schele, modified by Barrientos Q.

2012:22–23; Velásquez and García 2018:17–21). Unlike most instances of the title outside La Corona, *Sak Wahyis* at *Sak Nikte'* was never accompanied by the “Chatahn” *Winik* title. Furthermore, it was even prefixed by the *K'uhul* title on occasion, indicating that it came to function as a pseudo-emblem glyph or ethnonym for La Corona rulers (Figure 3), perhaps in a way similar to that of “Chatahn” *Winik*.

As for the references to this title outside of La Corona, we suggest that its frequent coupling with the “Chatahn” *Winik* title reflects a *Kaanul*-induced Late Classic conflation of distinct and once independent Early Classic political identities. Also, it is worth noting that except for codex-style vessels, most individuals carrying the *Sak Wahyis* title outside La Corona are women (Uxul, El Perú-Waka', and El Zotz). It seems possible that they were outsiders (from La Corona?) who helped cement political alliances in a way similar to how *Sak Wahyis* rulers of La Corona were repeatedly leveraged by their marriages to *Kaanul* princesses. It is also possible that given the esoteric nature of the term *Wahyis* (Velásquez and García 2018:4), both men and women from La Corona were conceived as prestigious religious specialists. In any case, these temporal, spatial, and syntactical patterns point to the probability that the *Sak Wahyis* title was the political identity of the native elite, both men and women, of La Corona throughout its entire dynastic history.

Kaanul expansion in the northwest Peten

During the fifth century A.D., the *Kaanul* capital Dzibanche established the control of its immediate surroundings through conquest, attested by 18 portraits of captives that formed the steps of the “Building of the Captives” (Nalda 2004; Velásquez 2005; see Velásquez and Balanzario 2024; Figure 4). Other alliances or military takeovers are further

suggested by the presence of the *Kaanul* emblem glyph in a hieroglyphic staircase in El Resbalón (Carrasco and Boucher 1987; Esparza 2012; Velásquez 2008:33). References in monuments at Pol Box in A.D. 573 (Esparza and Pérez 2009:9–10), Yo'okop in A.D. 593 (Shaw et al. 2001; Velásquez 2008:341; Wren et al. 2015), and Los Alacranes in A.D. 561 (Martin and Beliaev 2017:5; Velásquez 2008:340–341) indicate that these campaigns continued during the sixth century (Figure 4). Furthermore, the undeniable importance of Dzibanche at this time has been confirmed by the large extension of its settlement exposed by LiDAR images (see Estrada-Belli and Balanzario 2024), and the presence of Teotihuacan-style elements, such as the talud-tablero architecture and stucco reliefs of the Temple of the Cormorants, as well as the stucco reliefs recently found in the Tutil Group (Nalda and Balanzario 2014).

Given this historical context, it is important to note that evidence for the earliest activity of the *Kaanul* outside the immediate region of Dzibanche is found on La Corona's Panel 6 (Figure 5). This monument records the arrival of a *Kaanul* woman at *Sak Nikte'* in A.D. 520 to marry the local ruler, known as “Vulture *Winik*” (Martin 2008, 2020:186; Stuart et al. 2014). Unfortunately, due to erosion, her name is only partially legible as *Ix (?) Naah Ek'*. She is portrayed with a giant feline protector carrying Teotihuacan-related iconographic elements, such as *k'an* crosses, as well as central Mexican year signs, goggles, and fans, something that recalls the stucco relief in Dzibanche's Tutil Group (Nalda and Balanzario 2014:202; Figure 5). This *Kaanul* princess was the daughter of Dzibanche ruler *Tuun K'ab Hix* (Martin 2008, 2020:188; Stuart et al. 2014), who reigned for at least 26 years (A.D. 520–546) and was responsible for the initial expansion of *Kaanul* outside its immediate region. In fact, he supervised the accession of ruler *Kan I* of

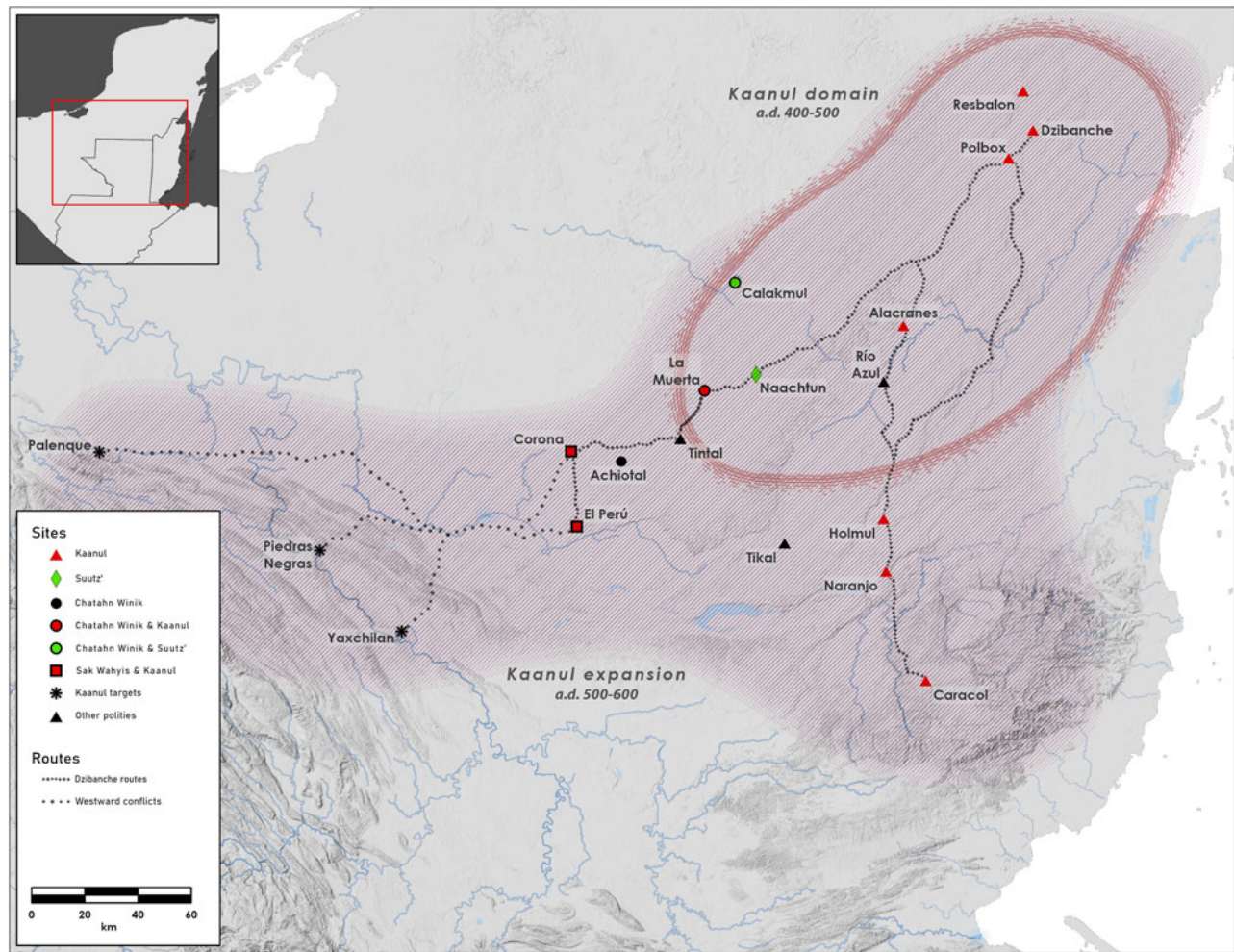


Figure 4. Map showing the sites allied or conquered by *Kaanul* during the Early Classic period, linked to least-cost path routes. Shaded areas represent *Kaanul* expansion during the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. Map by Canuto and Barrientos Q.

Caracol in A.D. 531 and ruler *Aj Nuumsaaj* of Naranja in A.D. 546 (Martin 2020:245; Martin et al. 2016:617; Velásquez 2008:337) expanding his influence in the southeast Peten and Belize. Furthermore, a reference to a captive *Tuun K'ab Hix* vassal in Yaxchilan Lintel 35 in A.D. 537 (Mathews 1997:77) also suggests that the western expansion of *Kaanul* extended as far as the Usumacinta region.

Considering that 200 linear km separate La Corona from Dzibanche, it is likely that the *Kaanul* expansion to the southwest had begun decades earlier, sometime in the fifth century. To reach La Corona, *Kaanul* would have traversed areas controlled by the *Suutz'* kingdom seated in Naachtun and the important site of Río Azul, whose political affiliation is still undefined during this period. Direct evidence of a military takeover is suggested by a reference in Dzibanche Monument 11 to a captive from Río Azul in either A.D. 505 or 518 (Beliaev 2017). Interestingly, this is consistent with the proposed destruction of Río Azul around A.D. 530 (Adams 1999:186). It is possible, in fact, that Dzibanche monuments 7b and 12 allude to the *Suutz'* kingdom when portraying captives with accompanying captions that include

a bat-head hieroglyph (Velásquez 2004:89, 92). Moreover, the presence of a possible *Kaanul Ajaw* in La Muerta might also be evidence of the *Kaanul* dynasty taking control of a depopulated Mirador region in order to gain access to La Corona and regions beyond.

The geopolitical implications of the arrival of Lady *Naah Ek'* to *Sak Nikte'* in the early sixth century A.D. help explain the beginnings of the *Kaanul* expansionist strategy carried out by *Tuun K'ab Hix*. This marriage was a maneuver to establish an important ally on the western side of the Central Lowlands. At that time, La Corona was an insignificant polity compared to *Kaanul's* other allies, therefore the political identity of its rulers could be profoundly transformed by *Kaanul*. In fact, from this point on, its kings would maintain multigenerational kin-based ties with the *Kaanul* dynasty through marriages that allow them to gain sociopolitical promotion in exchange for allegiance (bride-price). The *Kaanul* princesses were thus agents of political advancement for the *Sak Wahyis* kings who received singular attention on the site's copious Corona monuments (Canuto and Barrientos Q. 2020:185–186; Vázquez López 2014:128,

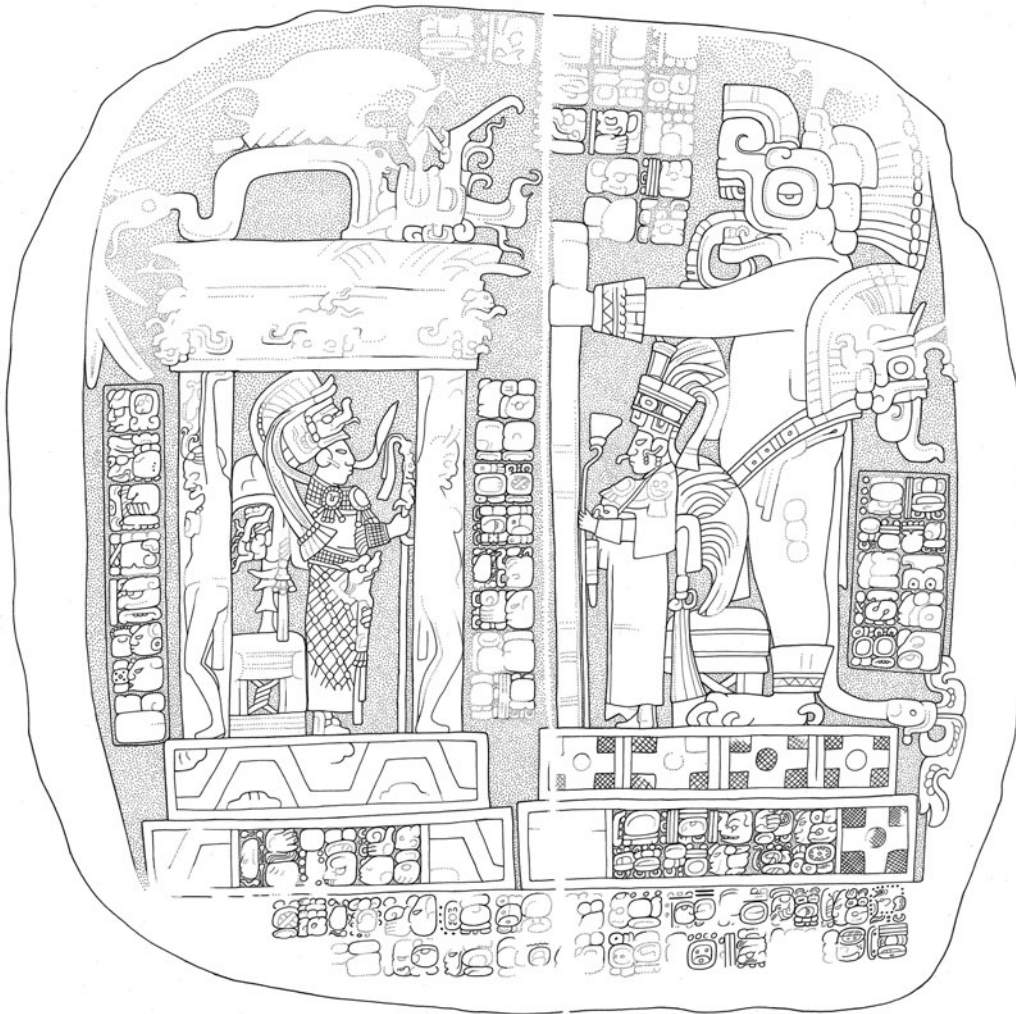


Figure 5. La Corona Panel 6. Drawing by Stuart.

2017:16). Perhaps for these mutually beneficial reasons, the political alliance between the *Sak Wahyis* and *Kaanul* would last for more than two centuries, turning the *Sak Wahyis* royal court into a de facto extension of *Kaanul*.

La Corona Altar 5 further elucidates the early expansion of *Kaanul* (Stuart et al. 2018). Found inside Structure 13R-45 of the Coronitas Group, this altar portrays a seated ruler holding a two-headed serpent ceremonial bar, from whose jaws emerge the heads of two patron deities (Figure 6). The image is accompanied by an inscription with a Long Count date of 9.5.10.0.0 (May 13, A.D. 544), making this the earliest dated monument recovered at the site. The fact that Altar 5 portrays a ruler invoking patron deities indicates that *Kaanul*-sponsored rulership at vassal sites such as La Corona involved the performance of mythic-religious acts, such as establishing new patron deities. Given that these same patron deities appear later, in a text from Panel 1 dated to A.D. 658, suggests that these gods were introduced to La Corona as a form of political legitimation of the *Kaanul*-sponsored dynasty through the unique and charismatic association of these rulers with mythical

entities who were claimed to enjoy a long-standing precedence in the region (Canuto and Barrientos Q. 2020:191; González 2021).

The accompanying Altar 5 text identifies the protagonist as *Chak Tok Ich'aak*, a figure already known from El Perú-Waka', a large Maya city located approximately 30 km to the south. Stela 44 from that site records the death (probably at Waka') of *Chak Tok Ich'aak* in A.D. 556 and the succession of his son, *Wa'oom Uch'ab Ahk* in A.D. 564, as well as his celebration of the 9.6.10.0.0 period-ending (Pérez et al. 2014), exactly one k'atun after La Corona Altar 5. Because of the short time between Altar 5 and Stela 44, it is noteworthy that the titles bestowed upon *Chak Tok Ich'aak* on both monuments are different. On La Corona Altar 5, he is the *Sak Wahyis*, while on El Perú-Waka' Stela 44, he is the *Waka' Ajaw*. To explain this difference, we must consider the broader geopolitics of the mid-sixth century A.D.

Since La Corona Altar 5 dates to A.D. 544, it is possible not only that *Chak Tok Ich'aak* succeeded "Vulture" *Winik* as ruler of La Corona, but also that he was his son. It would follow,



Figure 6. La Corona Altar 5. Photograph by Raúl González, PRALC.

then, that *Tuun K'ab Hix*, although not directly mentioned in La Corona Altar 5, was both grandfather and overlord of *Chak Tok Ich'aak*. Stela 44 of El Perú-Waka' further indicates that *Chak Tok Ich'aak* (1) was married to a woman named *Ikoom* carrying the titles of *Sak Wahyis* and *K'uhul "Chatahn" Winik*, who is also mentioned in Stela 43 (Navarro-Farr et al. 2020:206–207; Pérez et al. 2014:118–119; see Navarro-Farr et al. 2024); (2) was ruler of El Perú-Waka' less than a decade after Altar 5 was dedicated; and (3) was succeeded by his son, *Wa'oom Uch'ab Ahk*, as a vassal (*yajaw*) of the *Kaanul* ruler *K'ahk' Ti' Ch'ich*, successor of *Tuun K'ab Hix* (Martin and Beliaev 2017).

We interpret this series of events, titles, and dates to mean that *Chak Tok Ich'aak* was native to La Corona and a *Sak Wahyis* by birth, and married Lady *Ikoom*, a fellow member of the La Corona elite who also carried the *Sak Wahyis* title. While ruling *Sak Nikte'* in and around A.D. 544, *Kaanul* extended its political hegemony into the southern sector of the Peten. We suggest that *Chak Tok Ich'aak* played enough of a prominent role in *Kaanul's* expansionist strategy to be “promoted” to rule, as a *Kaanul* vassal, at the larger center of El Perú-Waka', where eventually his son, also as a *Kaanul* vassal, acceded to the throne. It is important to note that the current evidence does not rule out the possibility that *Chak Tok Ich'aak* was from El Perú-Waka' and ruled both centers contemporaneously, using different titles in each one.

Whatever the case, these data from La Corona and El Perú-Waka' clearly indicate that La Corona and *Chak Tok Ich'aak* played a key role in *Kaanul's* expansionist strategy that culminated in the subsequent *Kaanul* ruler, *K'ahk' Ti' Ch'ich*, defeating Tikal in A.D. 562 (Martin and Beliaev 2017). After this victory, in fact, the following five *Kaanul* rulers (“Sky Witness” *Yax Yopaat*, “Scroll

Serpent” *Yuknoom Ti' Chan*, and *Tajoom Uk'ab K'ahk'*) continued expanding their hegemony (see Velásquez and Balanzario 2024; Table 1). Their conquests included Palenque in A.D. 599 and A.D. 611 (Bernal 2012:354; Martin 2005:7; Mumary 2019:173, 250), which they probably reached through La Corona (Figure 4).

While the *Kaanul* kings had a major impact in larger centers with established dynasties, such as at Naranjo (Martin et al. 2016), Caracol (Martin 2017b), Naachtun (Nondédéo et al. 2015), Holmul (Estrada Belli and Tokovinine 2016), and El Perú-Waka' (Navarro-Farr et al. 2020, 2021; see Navarro-Farr et al. 2024), the case of La Corona is different. The absence of a preexisting major center in northwestern Peten made it possible for *Kaanul* to promote the *Sak Wahyis* of La Corona and make them rulers of a key node along its important “royal road” to the south and west, rendering it capable of reaching the Maya Highlands and the Tabasco Plain (Canuto and Barrientos Q. 2013; Figure 7). In this way, the *Sak Wahyis* helped *Kaanul* establish a large—if not the largest—hegemony in the Maya Lowlands.

The nature of the *Kaanul* hegemony

For reasons yet unknown, the *Kaanul* dynastic seat at Dzibanche was transferred to Calakmul in the early seventh century, although a faction of the *Kaanul* remained in Dzibanche afterwards (see Velásquez and Balanzario 2024). According to the Naranjo Hieroglyphic Staircase, originally located in Caracol Structure B-5 (Martin 2017b; see Helmke and Vepretskii 2024), an individual named “*Yuknoom Head*,” carrying the title of *Kaanul Ajaw*, but associated with toponyms at Calakmul (i.e., *Ux Te' tuun* and *Chiik Nahb*), defeated Naranjo in A.D. 631 in war (Martin 2017b; Tokovinine 2007). Furthermore, according to the same monument, this same person defeated the (Dzibanche-based?) *Kaanul* ruler *Waxaklajuun Ubah Chan* in A.D. 636. It is after this last battle that the dynastic seat moved from *Kaanul* (Dzibanche) to *Ux Te' Tuun* (Calakmul; Helmke and Awe 2016a, 2016b; Martin 2020:139; Martin and Velásquez 2016). This same transference of power—though dated to one year earlier—was also mentioned on La Corona's Element 33 (Stuart 2012a; Stuart et al. 2014; Figure 8).

While “*Yuknoom Head*” is the main protagonist of the *Waxaklajuun Ubah Chan* defeat, the first person claiming to be the *Kaanul* ruler at Calakmul was *Yuknoom Ch'een II* (it is likely that these names point to the same person; Martin 2017b; Martin and Velásquez 2016). Demonstrating the continued importance of the *Sak Wahyis* kingdom, *Yuknoom Ch'een II* visited La Corona in A.D. 635, perhaps even before the *Kaanul* dynasty was formally established at Calakmul. Portrayed in ballgame regalia, together with the La Corona ruler, *Sak Maas* (La Corona Elements 35 and 36), *Yuknoom Ch'een II* was likely forging a personal alliance (Figure 9). If, because of the timing of this visit, *Yuknoom Ch'een II* had not yet formally become the *Kaanul* ruler, this visit underscores how any and all factions of the *Kaanul* regime considered the *Sak Wahyis* critical to their long-term political fate. As reflected in later inscriptions, the decision of the *Sak Wahyis* to throw in with the

Table I. Dynastic rulers of La Corona, Dzibanche, and Calakmul in the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries A.D. After Martin and Beliaev 2017; Martin and Grube 2008; Martin and Velásquez 2016; Mumary 2019; Stuart et al. 2014.

	La Corona	Dzibanche	Calakmul
750			"Ruler Z"
745			"Ruler Y"
740			<i>Wamaw K'awiil</i>
735			
730	<i>Yajawte' K'inich'</i>		<i>Yuknoom Ti' K'awiil</i>
725			
720			
715			
710			
705			
700	<i>Chak Ak' Paat K'uy</i>		<i>Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk'</i>
695			
690			
685	<i>K'inich ? Yook</i>		<i>Yuknoom Ch'een II</i>
680			
675			
670			
665	<i>Chakaw Nahb' Chan</i>		
660			
655	<i>K'uk' Ajaw</i>		
650	<i>Sak Maas</i>		<i>Yuknoom "Head"</i>
645			
640			
635			
630			
625		<i>Waxaklajun Ubah Chan</i>	
620		<i>Tajoom Uk'ab K'ahk'</i>	
615		<i>Yuknoom Ti' Chan</i>	
610			
605			
600			
595		"Scroll Serpent"	
590			
585			
580			
575		<i>Yax Yopaat</i>	
570			
565		"Sky Witness"	
560			
555		<i>K'ahk' Ti' Ch'ich</i>	
550	<i>Chaak Took Ich'aak</i>		
545			
540			
535		<i>Tuun K'ab Hix</i>	
530	<i>"Vulture" Winik'</i>		
520			
515			
510			
500			
490			
480			
470			
460			
450			
440			
430		<i>Yuknoom Ch'een I</i>	
420			
410			
400			

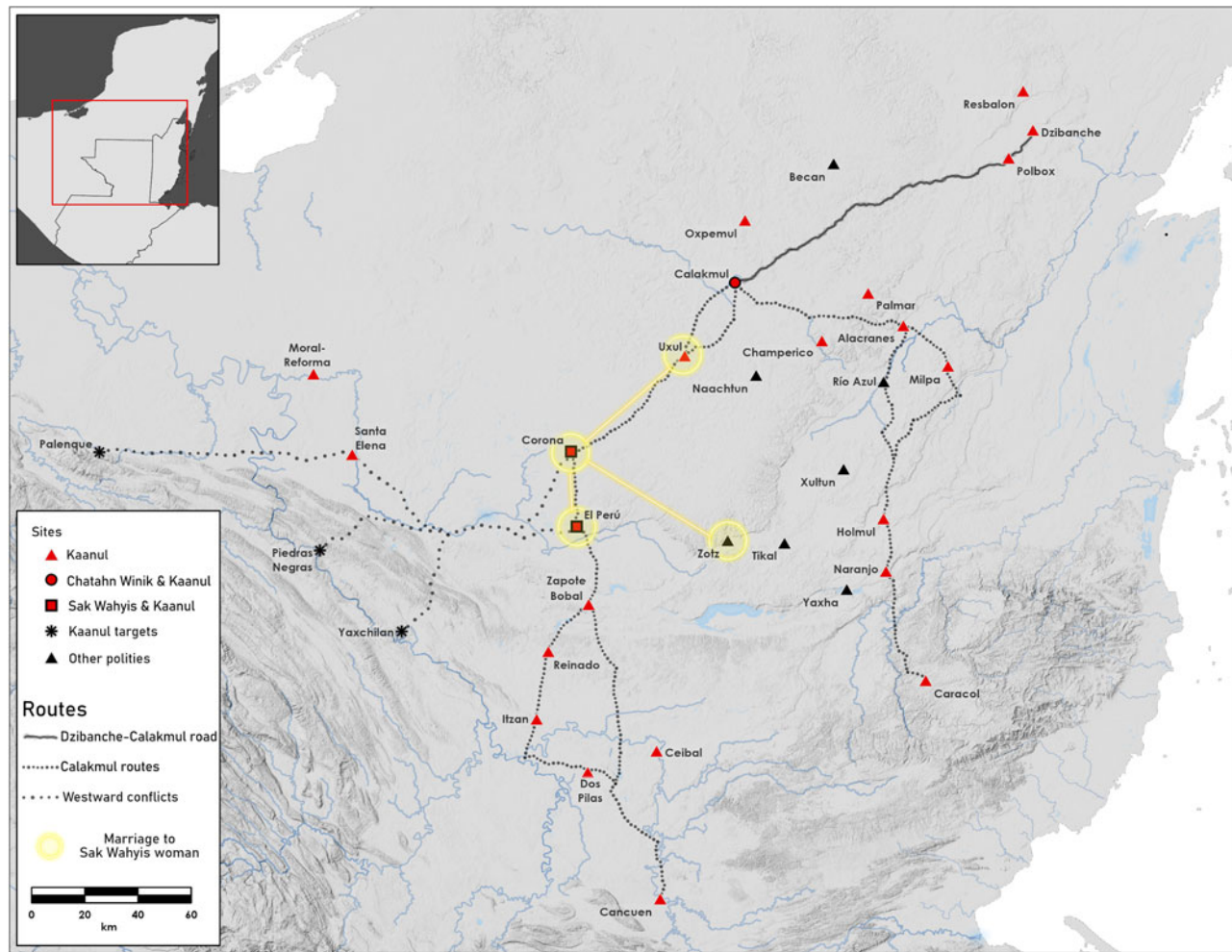


Figure 7. Map showing the sites allied or conquered by *Kaanul* during the seventh century A.D. (reign of *Yuknoom Ch'een II*), linked to least-cost path routes. Map by Canuto and Barrientos Q.

Calakmul faction of *Kaanul* paid great dividends, as it extended, renewed, and strengthened their political relevance for another century.

Although *Kaanul* accomplished considerable expansion while centered in Dzibanche, the seventh-century regime led by *Yuknoom Ch'een II* expanded even farther, especially towards the south, eventually reaching the Northern Maya Highlands in the following century (Figure 7). More than just a geographic enlargement, the seventh-century growth of *Kaanul* brought new political strategies that strengthened its presence. One of these was the incorporation of the political entities native to northern Peten and southern Campeche, such as “Chatahn” *Winik*, *Suutz'*, and *Sak Wahyis*. The epigraphic record shows that just after A.D. 630, different individuals carrying these titles seem to have intermarried. For example, Uxul Stelae 2 and 3, dated to A.D. 632, portray a *Suutz'* ruler paired with a “Chatahn” *Winik - Sak Wahyis* woman named *Ix Ajaw K'ahk* (Grube et al. 2012:21; Vázquez López 2017:20; Vázquez López et al. 2016:1103). In addition, the fact that the couplet “Chatahn” *Winik - Sak Wahyis* begins appearing during the reign of

Yuknoom Ch'een II suggests that these two previous entities were bonded as means of a broad political integration. The manufacture of codex-style vessels in Late Classic residential compounds at Nakbe and other sites of the El Mirador region is related to three individuals carrying the “Chatahn” *Winik - Sak Wahyis* title. Likely sponsored by the *Kaanul* court of Calakmul, they helped maintain their status as the native occupants of that area (Boucher and Palomo 2012:127; Lopes 2004; Morales 2021; Mumary 2016:112–113; Vázquez López et al. 2016:1104; Velásquez and García 2008:13–15).

Another integrating strategy that has been identified during this regime is the ballgame (Canuto and Barrientos Q. 2013:2; Helmke et al. 2015; Vázquez López 2017:25–30). Similar to the paired stelae, carved panels of rulers dressed as ballplayers were used to cement these political relations in La Corona (Stuart 2012b; Stuart et al. 2014), Uxul (Grube et al. 2012:34), Naranjo (Martin et al. 2016), El Perú-Waka' (Navarro-Farr et al. 2020:216), Hix Witz (Tunisi 2007), and more distant sites like Dos Pilas, Tonina, Quirigua, and perhaps even Tipan Chen Uitz (Helmke et al. 2015:22).

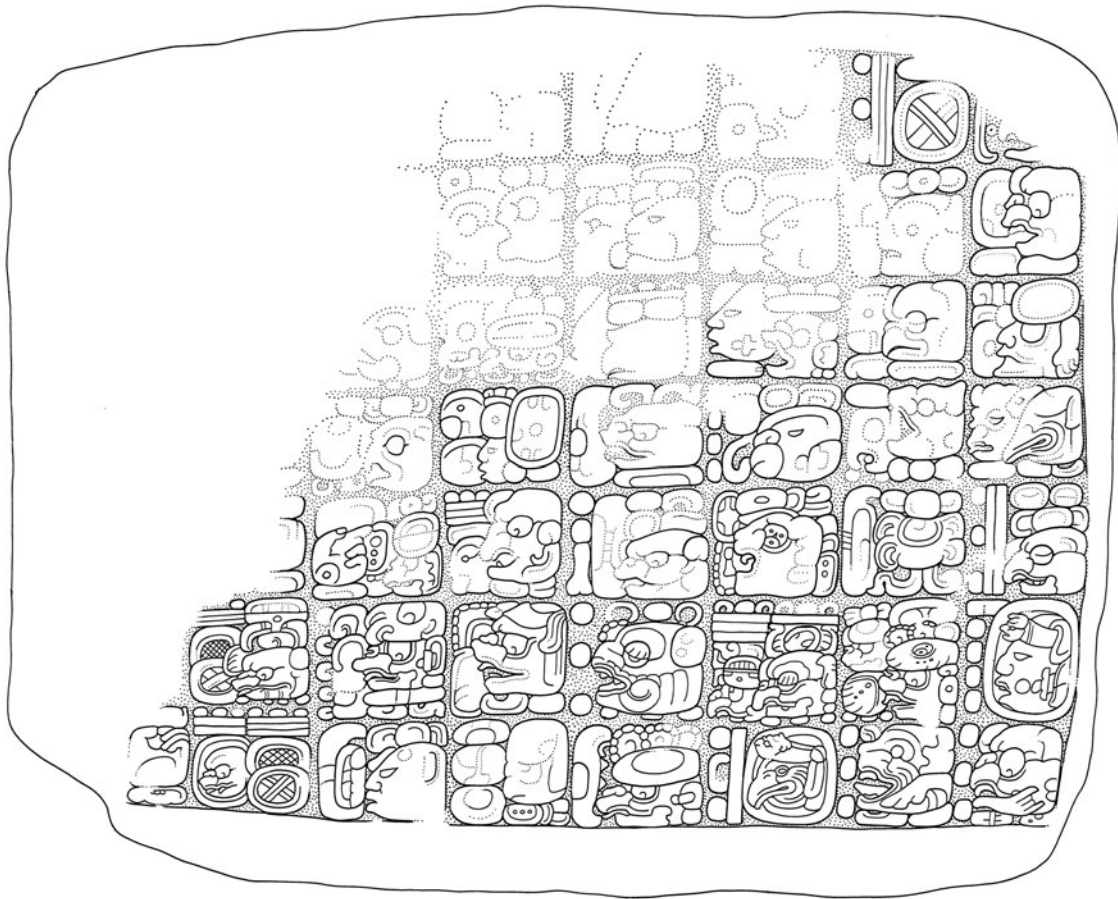


Figure 8. La Corona Element 33. Drawing by Stuart.

Based on the above, during the reign of *Yuknoom Ch'een II*, Naachtun (Nondédéo et al. 2015:118, 2016:73–75), Dos Pilas (Guenter 2003), Zapote Bobal (Hix Witz) (Martin and Reents-Budet 2010), Piedras Negras (Pallán 2010:5), Moral Reforma (Martin 2003), Cancuén (Fahsen and Jackson

2002), Santa Elena (Bernal 2016), Edzná (Pallán 2009:265, 521), Itzán, and El Reinado (Stuart 2012c), among others, became “incorporated” as new vassals to the already large *Kaanul* hegemony. During this same time, La Corona inaugurated a “golden age” that spanned the reigns of rulers Sak

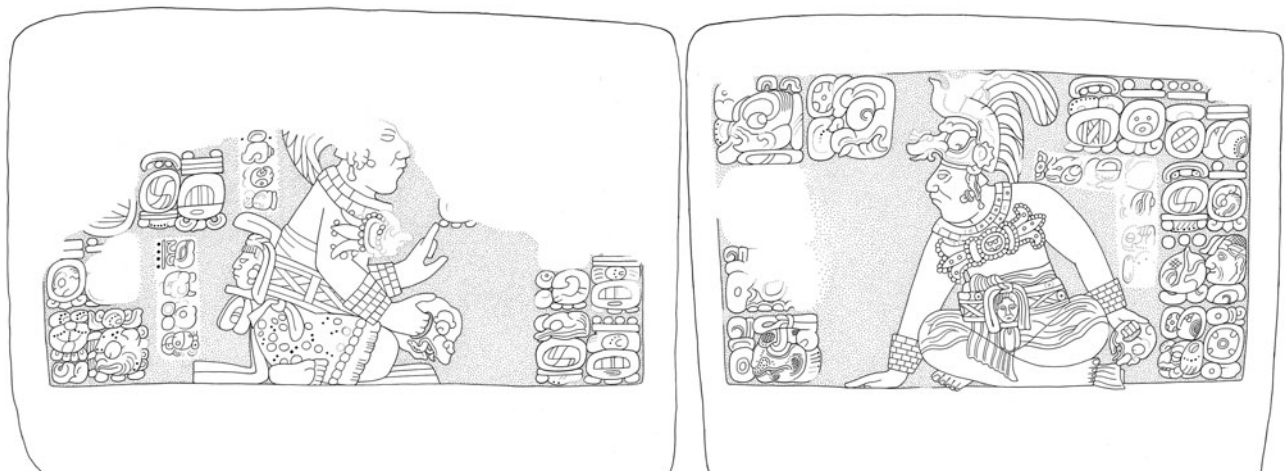


Figure 9. La Corona Elements 35 and 36. Drawings by Stuart.

Maas (A.D. 625–655), *K'uk' Ajaw* (A.D. 655–658), *Chakaw Nahb Chan* (A.D. 658–667), and *K'inich' (?) Yook* (A.D. 667–689; Table 1). The last is considered the most important ruler of *Sak Nikte'* because of his marriage in A.D. 679 to *Yuknoom Ch'een II's* daughter, extending the kin relationship between the *Sak Wahyis* and the *Kaanul* dynasty to its Calakmul faction. This enduringly intense and intimate relationship also involved frequent visits of *Kaanul* kings to La Corona, extended stays of *Sak Wahyis* princes at Calakmul, as well as multiple rituals of investiture celebrated by the vassal rulers. For example, La Corona Panel 1 tells that *K'inich' (?) Yook* lived in Calakmul as a youth for several years, during which time he was educated by and integrated into the *Kaanul* dynasty (Stuart et al. 2014:439–440). Presumably, it was during this period that *K'inich' (?) Yook's* marriage was arranged, further leveraging his subordinate parents (Canuto and Barrientos Q. 2020:182). We further learn from La Corona Panel 1 that, as an adult, *K'inich' (?) Yook* returned to Calakmul for a ritual of investiture wherein he donned the outfit of a military captain. In other words, he left La Corona dressed as a *Sak Wahyis* and returned home costumed in *Kaanul's* military regalia, as reflected in his two portraits of Panel 1 (Figure 10).

The asymmetrical relationship between *Sak Nikte'* and *Kaanul* was founded on a “healthy dose” of coercion, despite the absence of any overt military activity—this was yet another of *Kaanul's* strategies. So strong was *Kaanul's* control over its *Sak Wahyis* vassals that the latter would never have the freedom to present themselves as holders of the *K'uhul Ajaw* title. Instead, they continued using the city's toponym *Sak Nikte'* and the title *Sak Wahyis*, what we suggest was their ancestral ethnonym, which they elaborated occasionally with the *K'uhul* title (Figure 3). We see a similar situation at other minor centers located within Calakmul's surroundings, such as Uxul, Oxpemul, Champerico, and El Palmar (Tsukamoto and Esparza 2020). Similarly, their local rulers achieved the *Ajaw* status, but never the *K'uhul Ajaw* title (Grube 2005). This may also have been similar to other

centers without known inscriptions, such as Altamira, Naadz'caan, Xpuhil, and La Muñeca (Folan 1992).

The legacy of the *Kaanul*

This hegemonic regime lasted well into the eighth century, but not without major setbacks, beginning with the military defeat in A.D. 695 at the hands of *Jasaw Chan K'awiil*, ruler of its long rival and enemy Tikal. Yet *Sak Nikte'* remained as close as ever throughout this period; La Corona Element 33 indicates that six months after being defeated by Tikal, *Kaanul* ruler *Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk'* arrived at La Corona, proving again the high esteem with which *Kaanul* regarded their *Sak Wahyis* vassals (Stuart 2012a; Figure 8). How this hegemony unraveled is beyond the scope of this article, but we find that what happened in its aftermath is instructive regarding how it came to develop (Figure 11).

After the *Kaanul* downfall was complete in A.D. 744, some of the original, subordinated, and somehow “silenced” early political configurations of northern Peten revived. Predictably, the weakening of the *Kaanul* political power in Calakmul gave the “Chatahn” *Winik* and *Suutz'* factions an opportunity to regain political footing. Indeed, two Calakmul rulers, known as “Ruler Y” and “Ruler Z,” portrayed in Stelae 59 and 62 in A.D. 741 and A.D. 751 respectively, were both referred to as *K'uhul Suutz' Ajaw* (Gronemeyer 2012:28; Martin 2005:5, 9; Mumary 2019:284–286; Valencia and Esparza 2018:48), though a possible reference to “Ruler Z” still carries the title *Kaanul Ajaw* in two sculpture block fragments (Gronemeyer 2012:28; Valencia and Esparza 2018:50).

This political affiliation is consistent with evidence from Naachtun stelae 10 and 18 that record marriage alliances between Naachtun (the original seat of the *Suutz'* kingdom) and Calakmul in the second half of the eighth century A.D. (Nondédéo et al. 2016:75; Reese-Taylor et al. 2009; Vázquez López and Kupprat 2018:85). The reemergence of the *Suutz'* dynasty is also recorded at Oxpemul, another site formerly related to Calakmul, as evidenced by its bat emblem glyph in Stela 17 (A.D. 741), Stela 2 (A.D. 771), Altar 6, and

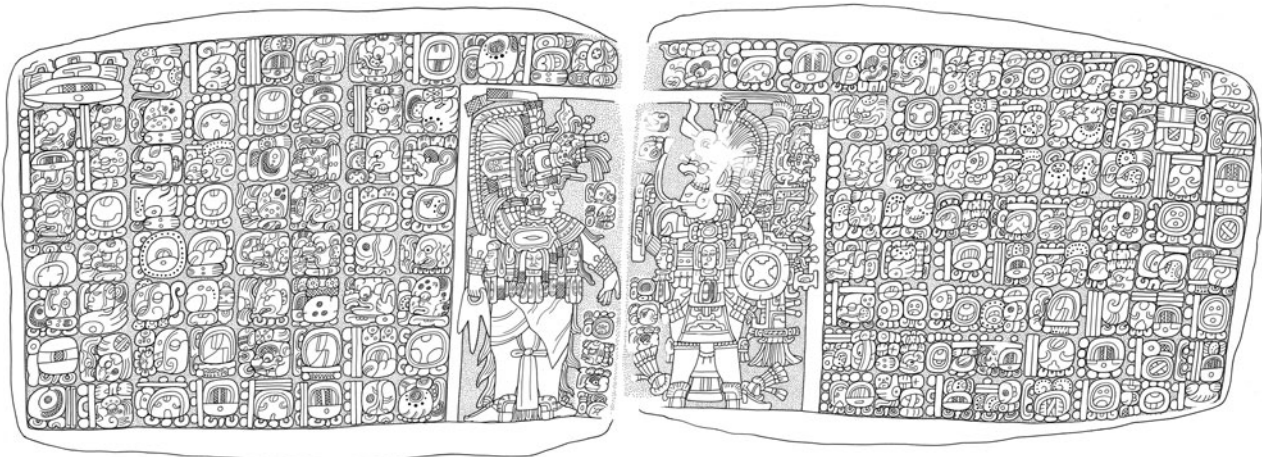


Figure 10. La Corona Panel 1. Drawing by David Stuart.

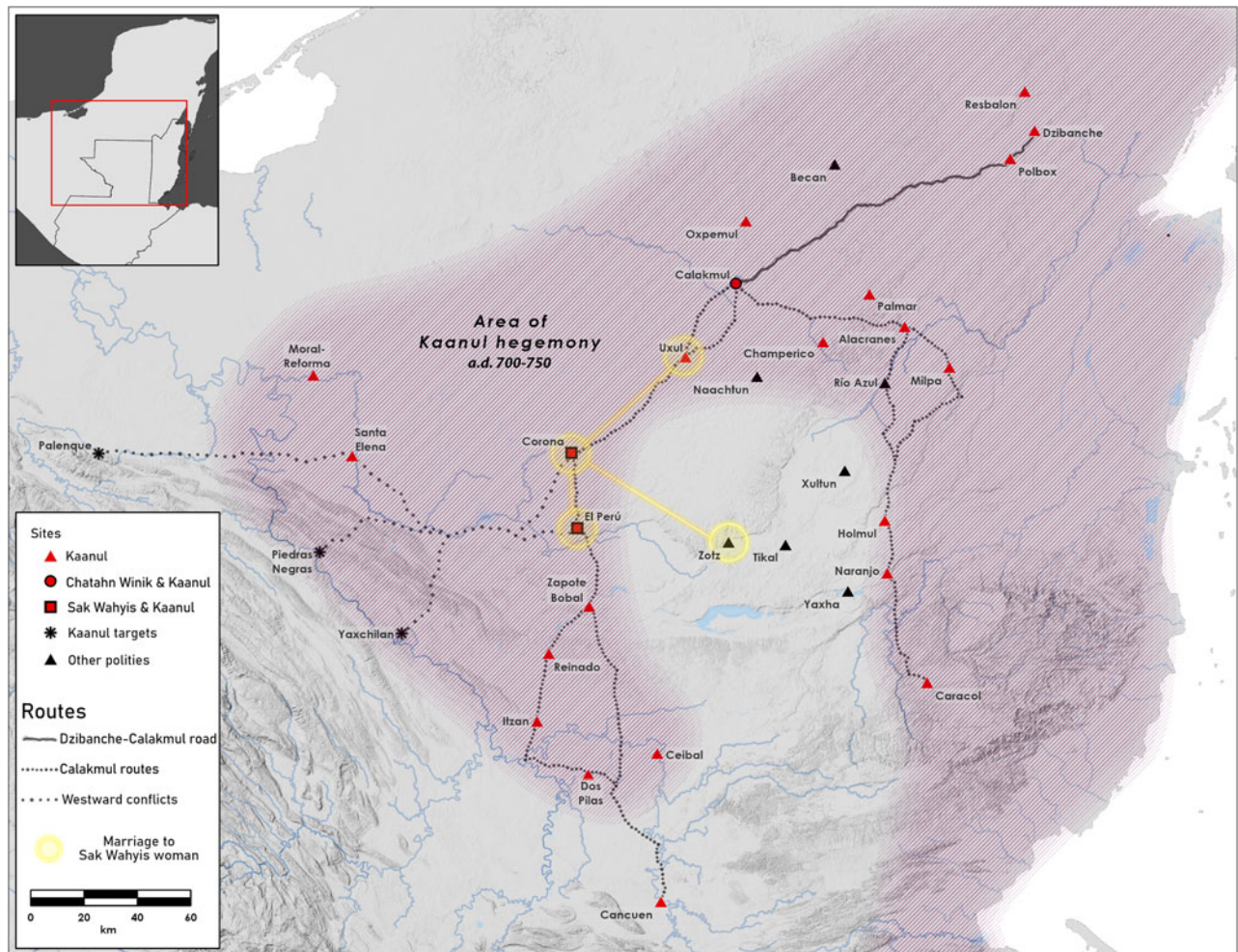


Figure 11. Map showing the sites allied or conquered by *Kaanul* during the first half of the eighth century, linked to least-cost path routes. Shaded area represents *Kaanul* expansion until A.D. 743. Map by Canuto and Barrientos Q.

Altar 15 (Grube 2005, 2008; Martin and Grube 2008:115; Robichaux 2010; Valencia and Esparza 2018; Vázquez López et al. 2016:1103). In addition, Stela 9, dated to A.D. 751, portrays a ruler impersonating *Chaak*, standing over a coiling snake, something that could refer to a military victory over *Kaanul* (Robichaux 2010:75–78, 185).

Concerning “Chatahn” *Winik*, they reappear in A.D. 731 at Calakmul as one of the sculptors of stelae 51 and 89, named *Sak Ikin(?) Yuhk* “Head,” who carries the title *K’uhul Chatan Winik Sak Wahyis* (Martin et al. 2015; Velásquez and García 2018:15). As mentioned before, the latter title is very common in codex-style vessels, especially carried by *Yopaat Bahlam* and his son *Titomaj K’awiil*, who resided in Nakbe (Lopes 2004; Martin et al. 2015; Morales 2021). Eventually, “Chatahn” *Winik* would also be considered an independent polity, as reflected in the list of emblem glyphs carved in Altar 3 of Altar de Los Reyes that dates to around A.D. 800 (Grube 2003; Martin 2020:148; Vázquez López et al. 2016:1104; Velásquez and García 2018:18).

In a similar fashion, the *Sak Wahyis* of La Corona became the central political community after the fall of the *Kaanul*

hegemony, consistent with changes in the architecture, sculptural art, ceramics, and funerary offerings at the site. La Corona underwent major changes in architectural construction in the middle of the eighth century A.D., especially in the palace complex and in structures that became funerary sanctuaries of post-*Kaanul* rulers (Structures 13Q-1 and 2). These changes could be interpreted as a reaction to the collapse of the regional *Kaanul* polity within which it had played a critical and vigorously celebrated role. Most remarkably, during this period, there is evidence for widespread relocation of hieroglyphic panels (as *spolia*), many of which contained historical information about the *Sak Wahyis* and *Kaanul* alliance (Barrientos Q. et al. 2016)—something that also happened at the same time in other *Kaanul*-allied centers like El Perú-Waka’ (Navarro-Farr et al. 2020:216) and Uxul (Grube et al. 2012:34–36). In La Corona, these sculptures were methodically relocated to important locations throughout the site in pairs or sets of blocks, usually not in their original order. As in other known cases of *spolia* in the Maya region, the re-use of sculptures was aimed at evoking a legacy meant to serve a

new reality (Nielsen 2020). They therefore seem to represent an effort at curating evidence of past glories—including conquest, subordination, changes in religious beliefs, reverence to ancestors—in order to safeguard a particular “collective memory” relevant to a post-*Kaanul* landscape.

The *spolia* were important for the “re-foundation” or “reformulation” of a new *Sak Wahyis* regime between A.D. 750 and 800 that we still do not fully understand. However, we can surmise that the thorough cancellation of elite buildings, combined with the repositioning of hieroglyphic panels focused on their long-standing association with *Kaanul*, suggests that the last rulers of La Corona were compelled to navigate changes to their political responsibilities that likely left them more independent than before. At this time, fine funerary offerings of jade, pyrite, and hematite connect La Corona with sites like Aguateca and Cancuen (Barrientos Q. et al. 2020), suggesting that *Sak Nikte'* may have appropriated part of the *Kaanul* “royal road.” This new role seems to be supported by the fact that in A.D. 791 another foreign woman came to La Corona (La Corona Altar 4; Stuart et al. 2014:441), identified with the *Mutul* emblem glyph. It remains plausible that she hailed from the Pasion/Petexbatun zone, or even from Tikal itself.

Discussion

With all this epigraphic, iconographic, and archaeological evidence, the notion of regional, hegemonic, and even “imperial aspirations” among the Classic Maya is now theoretically and empirically reasonable. The hegemonic state

developed by the *Kaanul* was characterized not by the eradication of allied or conquered local polities like those of the “Chatahn” *Winik, Suutz'*, or *Sak Wahyis*, but rather by their integration into a larger state. In fact, from the perspective of La Corona and other northwestern Peten sites, military action, indirect management, kinship assimilation, intrusion upon local and regional economies, and imposition of patron deities were all strategies of political integration that the *Kaanul* regime deployed at different degrees of intensity (for a more detailed discussion, see Canuto and Barrientos Q. 2020). As a regime, *Kaanul* created a complex but successful political landscape, hinged “not simply on the production and enforcement of relations of authority and subjection as experience—that is, in the movement of people and things across physical space—but also on the fostering of an enduring perception of geopolitical relationships” (Smith 2003:135–136).

Among the polities integrated to the *Kaanul* regime, the case of La Corona is of particular interest. Despite its modest architectural size and population of only 5,000–8,000 people, it had an abnormal number of hieroglyphic inscriptions (over 75 pieces; Figure 12). Although La Corona can be characterized as a small royal court, similar to sites like Minanha, La Joyanca, El Cayo, or Uxul (Grube et al. 2012; Iannone 2009), labels such as “secondary,” “subordinate,” “entrepôt,” or “petty royal court” do not sufficiently capture its particular importance, given not only the quantity and quality of texts (they include the longest Precolumbian text found in Guatemala to date), but also the presence of direct references to the *Kaanul* ruler



Figure 12. Reconstruction of La Corona around A.D. 780. Drawing by Julián González, courtesy of PACUNAM.

biographies. The only way to explain this inconsistency is to appreciate how the long-standing asymmetrical reciprocity between both kingdoms resulted in the installation of a “hybrid” political regime that combined new components (patron deities, relatives, access to prestige goods) with pre-existing ones (political identity, ancestral lineage). In other words, the rulers of *Sak Nikte’* felt obligated to record not only their local history, but also that of *Kaanul* kings. For that task, they certainly had *Kaanul*-sponsored scribes and artists at their service.

Nevertheless, however mighty and powerful the *Kaanul* became in the seventh century, their movement from Dzibanche to Calakmul required contending with, dominating, and eventually integrating multiple native political groups. In other words, the *Kaanul* dynasty was intrusive to Calakmul’s “Chatahn” *Winik*. As Martin and Velásquez (2016:30) point out, the establishment of Calakmul as the new capital was a “deliberate act of dynastic (re-)foundation.” It appears that the *Sak Wahyis* of La Corona may have played a singularly important role in the regional integration through their intermarriage with other dynasties at Uxul and El Perú-Waka’. Along the same lines, the “fusion” of *Sak Wahyis* and “Chatahn” *Winik* through the production of codex-style vessels allowed for consolidation of political identities by means of highly symbolic funerary, ritual, and feasting activities (Boucher and Palomo 2012:125–126). Moreover, the “dynastic vases” served as means to reformulate and reinforce the *Kaanul* legitimacy and authority, through a dynastic genealogy linking the Calakmul rulers to the Early Classic period at a time when the *Kaanul* hegemony was losing its power (Mumary 2016:112–113, 2019:289, 301).

Data from La Corona and other “minor” *Kaanul* allies or vassals show how the *Kaanul* regime cannot be neatly defined as a “typical” Classic Maya polity. The Classic period *Kaanul* regime practiced a hegemonic governance that included the development of multiple and geographically extensive political relationships as its basis for regional domination. The establishment of secondary or satellite centers like La Corona helped to physically link the territory under control through “royal roads,” but political unity was also achieved ideologically, through a heterogeneous set of political values and identities (Canuto and Barrientos Q. 2020:172–173). Like many ancient hegemonies, the *Kaanul* permitted, incorporated, and even depended on preexisting infrastructural autonomy at local levels. Late Classic *Kaanul* centered at Calakmul under the authority of *Yuknoom Ch’een II* was thus the accumulation of political, economic, religious, and social components from the regions conquered and absorbed, expressed in subsistence strategies, calendric systems, lineage and kin rights and privileges, socioeconomic communities, religious beliefs and practices, and political institutions. This constellation of autonomous administrative nodes maintained mutually beneficial asymmetrical relations with the “central” state, as it was registered in the many inscriptions at all these sites that refer to *Kaanul* rulers.

La Corona was a historically contingent product of hegemonic forces. In this sense, it belonged to a larger regional regime for at least two centuries of its existence. Once that regime faltered and faded, La Corona was left to fend for itself

and reconstruct a government with its legacy of belonging to a larger political entity. Its development and persistence is evidenced not for the stable political structure of the secondary center, but rather as an effective adaptation between regimes. This case evokes the nature of other “small” or “secondary” sites with a considerable epigraphic record that gained total or relatively higher political autonomy after the dismantling of the *Kaanul* hegemony throughout the Maya Lowlands (Oxpemul, Quirigua, Dos Pilas, Cancuen, etc.). Only by acknowledging the strength and influence of such a hegemonic regime, even after its demise, can we understand the geopolitical landscape of the second half of the eighth century, and perhaps, the very beginnings of the political fragmentation that led to the larger collapse later.

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