

Two Captives from Uxul

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Our understanding of Classic Maya politics relies to a large degree on hieroglyphic inscriptions recording wars, victories, and the taking of important captives. Through these statements we can reconstruct the ancient political landscape and identify polities which were in conflict with each other. In this short essay we present two panels from different contexts which have in common that they display captives from Uxul. The first panel is from Coba, Quintana Roo, the second is a fragment of a panel or stela of unknown provenance.

A Captive from Uxul on Coba Panel I9

Panel 19 from Coba is 0.42 m high, 0.49 m wide and 0.10 m thick (Figure 1). According to María José Con Uribe, the panel comes from a place not specified within the site; however, some of the workmen state that it has been found in the Pinturas Group, apparently reused in a secondary context. María José Con Uribe detected the remains of carving on the surface of the panel that was originally covered almost entirely by a 2-3cm layer of stucco, with remains of blue and black pigment still attached to it (Mónica López Portillo Guzmán, personal communication to Octavio Esparza, 2015; Esparza Olguín 2016: 239).

The importance of this panel is based on the fact that it contains potentially important information about another Maya site at a large distance from Coba – Uxul, where the University of Bonn has an ongoing archaeological project since 2009 (Grube et al. 2013; Grube and Delvendahl 2014). The clue for this discovery is the large glyph under the captive. This is the Uxul emblem, or “toponymic title” as Grube has called it in a 2005 paper about toponyms and emblems in Southern Campeche (Grube 2005). The core of the Uxul title is a **NAAH** prefix in front of a sign that initially resembles the logogram **WITZ** “mountain, hill” or the **lu** syllable. However, it lacks the small “comb” infix of the **lu** sign and instead has a shaded inner curl. Unfortunately, all examples of this toponym from Uxul monuments itself are poorly preserved and hardly show any details of the main sign (Figure 2). Yet, on the panel the Uxul glyph can still be identified because of the presence of the **NAAH** prefix, which otherwise is a rare element in the context of titles.

a



b

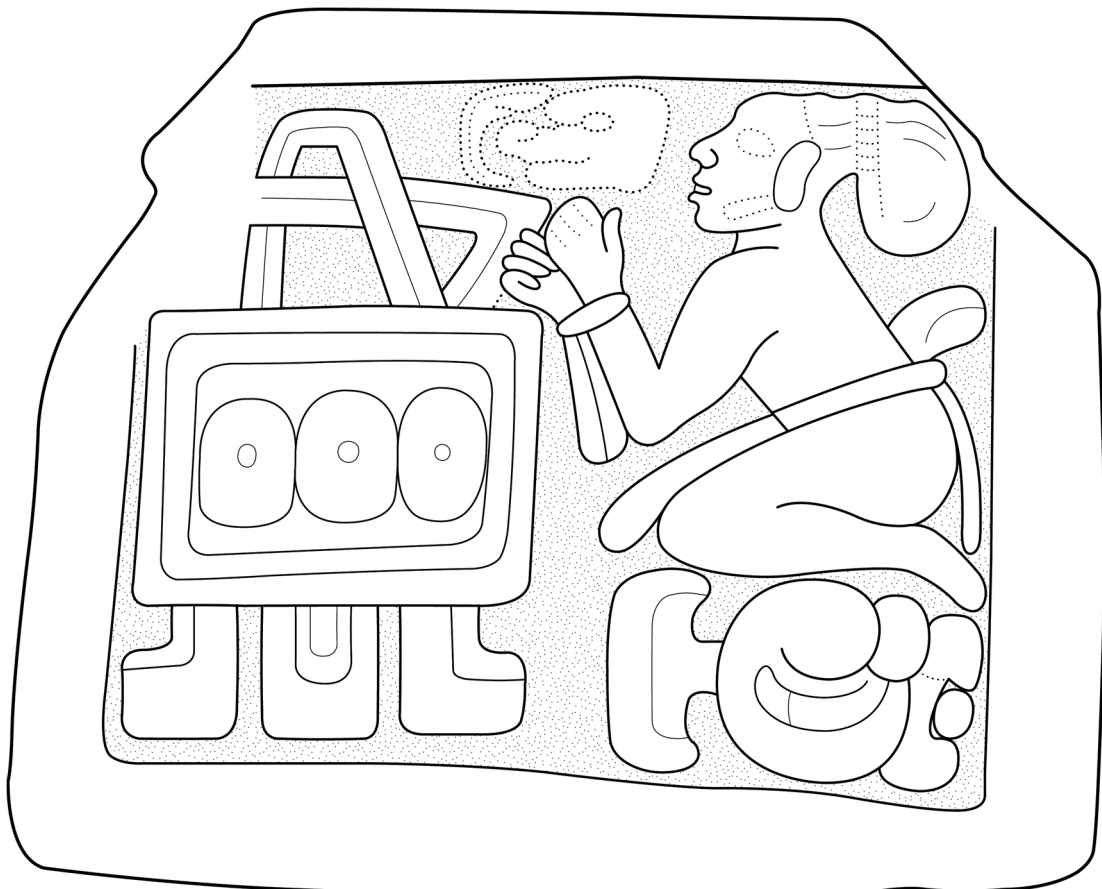


Figure 1. Coba Panel 19; a) photo by Maria José Con (reproduced with her kind permission); b) drawing by Octavio Esparza Olguin.

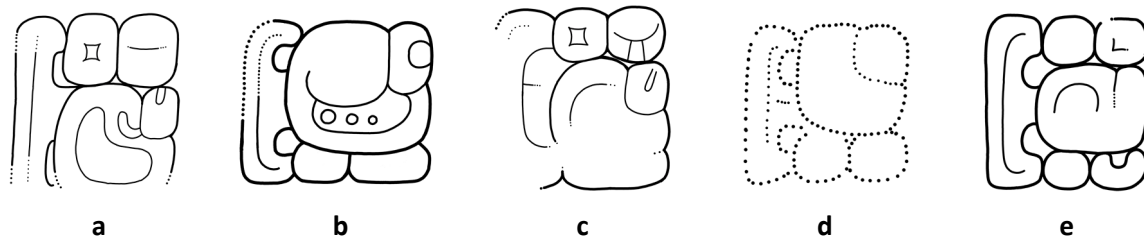


Figure 2. The Uxul glyph on monuments from Uxul; a) Altar 7; b) Stela 14; c) Stela 6; d) Altar 2; e) Stela 10 (drawings by Nikolai Grube).

In a recent study of the scribal signatures on Calakmul Stelae 51 and 89, Simon Martin, Stephen Houston and Marc Zender have noticed that the same name **TZAK-BAHLAM-ma** is followed by the Uxul glyph on Stela 51, while on Stela 89 the place of the scribe's origin is written **AJ-NAAH-ku-ma** (Martin et al. 2015) (Figure 3). The substitution in a controlled context strongly suggests, as the authors point out, that the reading of the Uxul glyph was *naahkuum*. They also suggest that the **lu** semblant main sign of the Uxul title could have had the reading **KUUM** or **KU'M**. In the article the authors make no intention to propose a translation for the ancient name of Uxul. Although we have no good translation for the name either, it is tempting to see it as a compound, where *naah* stands for “house” and *kuum* for a particular quality of the house. In this context, the toponym is followed by an a syllabogram, which certainly stands for water, *ha'*, a very common suffix to toponyms (Tokovinine 2013: 28). Other images of captives sitting on the glyphs for their places of origin confirm that the glyph in question indeed is a toponym and lends further support to the identification of the captive on the Coba panel as a man from Uxul.

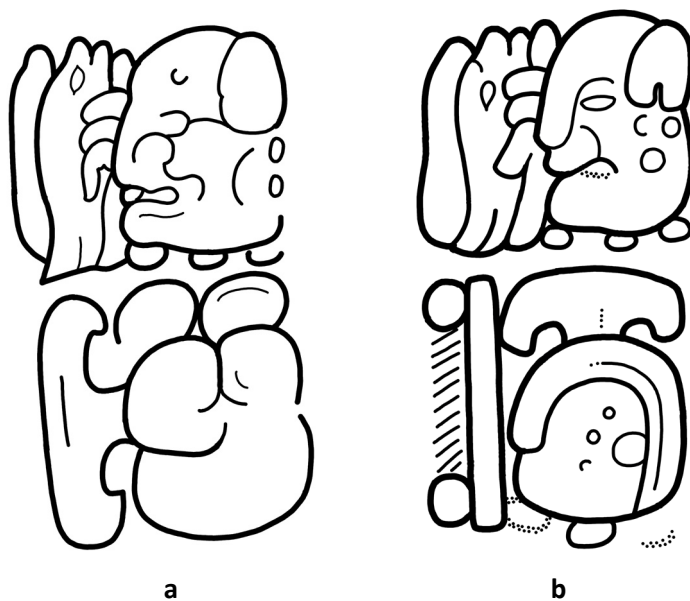


Figure 3. The substitution between the Uxul glyph and NAAH-ku-ma at Calakmul; a) on Calakmul Stela 51; b) on Calakmul Stela 89 (drawings by Nikolai Grube after one by Simon Martin).

The captive is hardly dressed; he wears his hair without a headdress, hold together only by a knot. Well in line with typical representations of captives in Maya art also is the replacement of the earspools by simple strips of paper. The captive holds the tied arms in front of his body in a position of humiliation and begging for mercy.

The name of the captive may be found in the one single glyph in front of his head. Unfortunately, it is not well preserved. It consists of a prefix and a head, possibly the logogram for **AHIIN**, “alligator” (Esparza Olgúin 2016: 241).

The left half of the panel shows a large Mexican Year sign. It consists of a trapezoid upper element, a large box with three circles on the outside, and three “feet”, similar to the support of the Initial Series Introductory Glyph in Maya writing. The three circles apparently represent jade disks similar to the ones seen in association with the Mexican Year sign on the Aztec Codex Borbonicus, p. 30. (Taube 2000: 277-280). In Maya art, the Mexican Year sign appears in context of war and is commonly part of headdresses worn by warriors and in scenes which represent the War Serpent and the Teotihuacan Tlaloc. Karl Taube has pointed out the close connection between this Teotihuacan imagery in the Maya world and fire as an agent of destruction and transformation. The image on the Coba panel establishes a clear link between the taking of a captive and a war event, although the details of this war remain unknown. Esparza Olguín points out that the presence of Mexican imagery in Coba is extremely rare. However, the occurrence of fine gray ceramics during the VIIth and VIIIth century points to contacts of Coba with the western Maya world and the Chontalpa region during this period of time (Esparza Olguín 2016: 244).

The panel establishes a link between Coba and Uxul, which is astonishing, given that the distance between the two sites is more than 350 kilometers as the Guacamaya flies. Were the lords of Uxul trying to expand their zone of influence towards the north? Or was the captive taken during a raid undertaken by Coba? The capture of a personage of Uxul on the part of the dynasty of Cobá, would imply that its lords not only maintained conflicts with populations or large settlements in the northern Yucatan Peninsula, but also with polities located at great distance, such as the Central lowlands. Although in principle a conflict of this magnitude results surprising, we have multiple examples to confirm the interaction between sites located in different regions of the Maya area, showing that great distances were not an insurmountable problem for the establishment of relations among distant Mayan settlements.

A Captive from Uxul on a Monument of Unknown Provenance

Another captive from Uxul can be identified on a fragmented sculpture, possibly a part of a panel or a stela without known provenance in a United States collection, first published by Karl Herbert Mayer (1995: Cat. No. 23). The fragment is 50 cms high and 43 cms wide (Figure 4). According to Mayer, the upper edge of the sculpture appears to be sawn, while the lower edge is broken. The only published photo also shows a clear saw line on the right side of the fragment, suggesting that only the left side of the panel is in its original shape.

The carving shows a human head in profile, facing right. The hair is disarranged and without any adornment. The lack of a headdress, as well as the replacement of the earspools by strips of paper leaves no doubt that the head is that of a captive. The body of the captive is broken off; only parts of the shoulder still remain on the fragment. When the sculpture was complete, the head must have belonged to a captive flanking and looking up to a main figure in the center of the monument.

There are two glyph blocks above the head. The first glyph block is **AJAW?-po-mo**, or *pom ajaw?*, the second glyph block is totally effaced.

Two further glyph blocks are arranged vertically directly in front of the face of the captive. We cannot be absolutely sure that they are also part of this captive’s name, but similar arrangements of glyph blocks with images of captives elsewhere suggest that they could still be a continuation of the same nominal phrase. The first glyph block is **NAAH-KUUM-TE’**. This is clearly the Uxul toponymic title (*naahkuum*), but followed here by a **TE’** sign. We wonder whether the **TE’** logogram hints towards the interpretation of **KUUM**, the main sign of the Uxul glyph, as a fruit or a tree, or something made out

of wood¹. A suffix, which is not **wa** and thus a complement for an **AJAW** sign is found with a few other examples of the Uxul glyph, but in most cases the details are eroded (Figs. 2b, c, d). The shape could be that of **TE'** sign. The next glyph on the fragment is the well-known **SAK-WAY-si**, *sak wayis* title. It is part of the name-phrases of rulers from polities in the Northern Petén, such as La Corona, and Southern Campeche and is very common on codex-style ceramics—many of which were produced under the patronage of a lord bearing this title. Grube thinks that at some time, *sak wayis* was the name of an important local family from Uxul. This interpretation is supported by two other occurrences of the *sak wayis* glyph on Uxul Stelae 16 and 17. Stela 17 talks about *u mam sak wayis*, “the grandfather/the forefather of sak wayis” (Grube and Paap 2010). This stela was erected on top of the heavily looted pyramid M1, which probably was the ancestor shrine of the *sak wayis* family in Uxul.

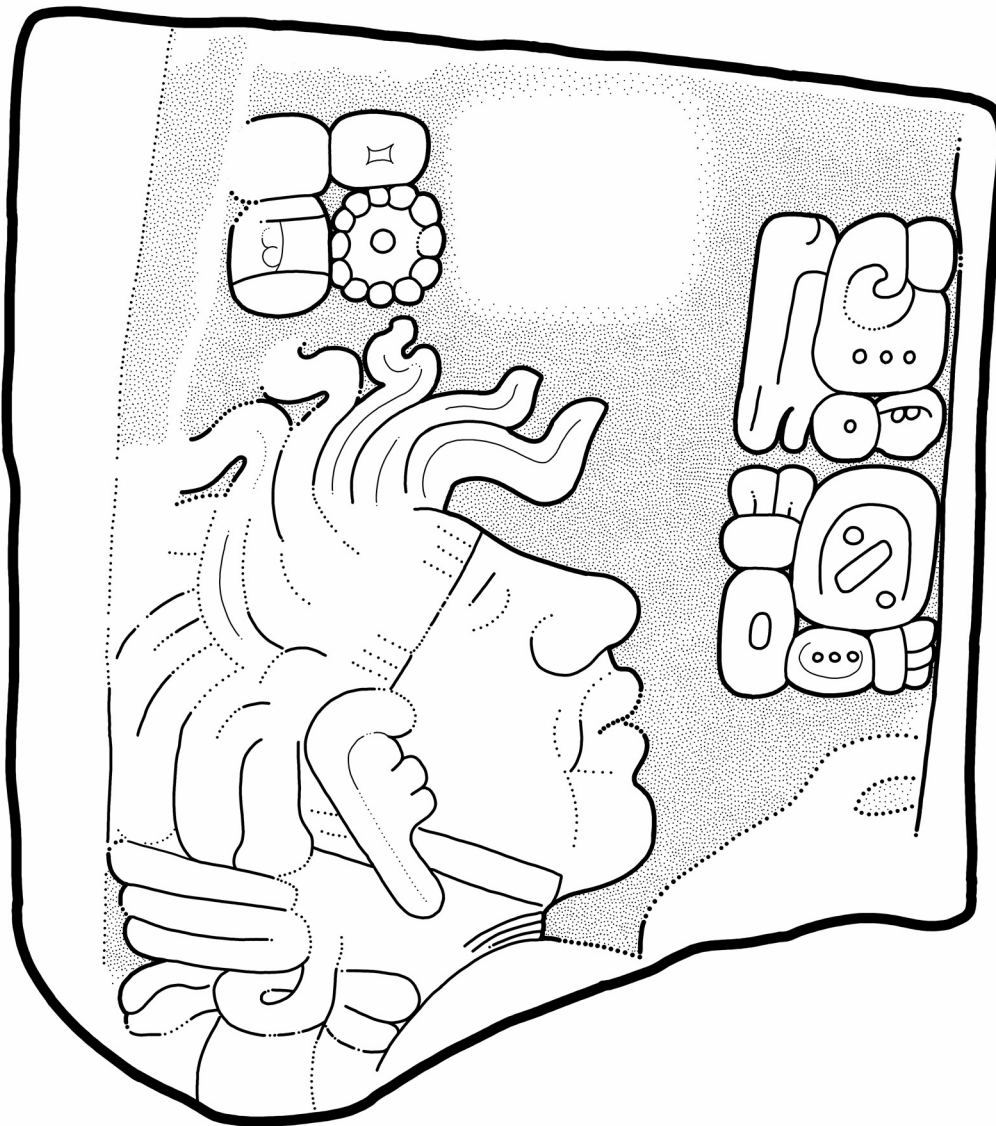


Figure 4. The Captive Panel (Mayer 1995: Cat. No. 23) (drawing by Nikolai Grube).

¹ *Kuum-te'* could be related to Yucatec *kumche'* „troje donde guardan maíz, troje hecho de palos; barquilla triangular que forman los indios de maderos colocando el vértice abajo para poner las mazorcas de maíz con las puntas para abajo” (Barrera Vásquez 1980: 351). An alternative explanation could be that *kuum* is related to the Lacandon word *kuum* “palo de escoba” (Hofling et al. 2015: 192). In the first case, Uxul would have been known as “House of the maize storage”, in the second case, the name of Uxul would translate as “house of the Escoba-trees”.

Although there can be no doubt that the captive on this fragment is from Uxul, the historical value of this information is limited because of the lack of any contextual data. Neither the time of the capture can be identified, nor can we determine the identity of the captor. Stylistically, the image is similar to captives on Coba monuments, such as those on Stelae 1, 4, 6 and 20 and Panels 2 and 4. The fact that the fragment has reputedly been in the United States since the 1960s could support an origin from a site that was already accessible to looting by this time, rather than to the Central Petén, where looting of monuments began later.

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