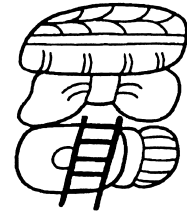


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Glyph Dwellers



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The History of Xkuy, an Unidentified Southeastern Center¹

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The sites of Quiriguá and Copán offer an abundance of data concerning the political role of secondary centers within the southeastern Maya region. Although several sites are mentioned, the most prominent is an unidentified center nicknamed Xkuy, first identified in the inscriptions of Quiriguá by Looper (1995; see also 1999) and by Schele in the inscriptions of Copán (Schele and Looper 1996). It is mentioned in one text at Copán (the stone cylinder located in the town museum; Schele 1987) and on four monuments at Quiriguá (Stela E, Zoomorph G and Altars O' and P'; see Jones 1983; Morley 1937-38; Thompson 1945). The *xkuy* nickname derives from the typical spelling of the polity as **xu-ku-ya** (Fig. 1). Apart from a single early mention at Copán, Xkuy is noted repeatedly at Quiriguá, where it increases in frequency on monuments dedicated between 766 and 795, reaching a peak in 790. This period coincides approximately with the apex of centralized authority at Quiriguá, as well as the growth of numerous relatively small polities throughout the southeast, of which I assume Xkuy was one.



Figure 1. Xkuy ajaw, from QRG Stela E.

At Quiriguá, the Xkuy compound is consistently presented in a titular context, associated with glyphs reading *ajaw* 'lord'. While such titles may be used with reference either to deities or

¹ This note was first presented at the session *Strategies of Integration and Administration in the Southeast Maya Area: A Case Study from the El Paraíso Valley, Honduras*, organized by Ellen E. Bell and Marcello A. Canuto at the Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Austin, Texas, in April 2007. I would like to thank the session organizers for inviting me to participate. The research at Quiriguá reported in this note was generously supported by the Instituto de Antropología e Historia of Guatemala. Research funding was provided by the National Science Foundation DBS 9307752, the William J. Fulbright Scholarship Board, and the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

historical persons, I favor the second alternative for several reasons. First, the Xkuy ajaw title is never associated with glyphs reading *k'uh* 'god', as is typical of deities at Quiriguá, as elsewhere. In addition, the Xkuy ajaw is always mentioned as having acted under the auspices of, or accompanied by, the ruler. In contrast, gods usually oversee the actions of rulers themselves. Further, in several instances, the title is preceded by a nominal phrase consisting of *k'in* 'sun', a pair of upraised arms (possibly *kuch* 'carry') and *b'ahlam* 'jaguar'. This is an attested lordly name, identical the name of a ruler of Pomona (see Schele and Grube 1994). Because the Xkuy compound never occurs in a full Emblem Glyph context, it can be identified as a lordly title, but not that of a paramount ruler or king.

In chronological order, the events associated with Xkuy are as follows:

1. February 20, 718, Xkuy burns.
2. November 24, 762, K'in Kuch B'ahlam, Xkuy ajaw receives a palanquin?, under the auspices of K'ahk' Tiliw.
3. January 20, 771, Xkuy ajaw witnesses the Period Ending.
4. July 27, 785, K'in Kuch B'ahlam, and the To' ajaws witness the death of K'ahk' Tiliw.
5. November 1, 786, ?? is captured, and the skin and Tlaloc mask of the Xkuy ajaw are received.

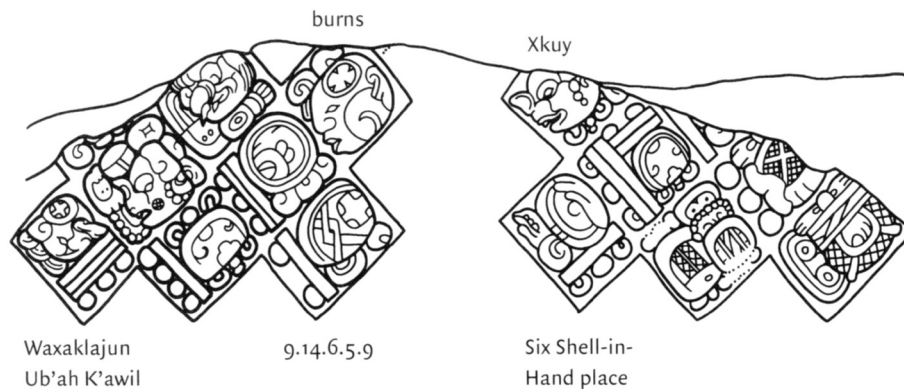


Figure 2. Text from Cylindrical Sculpture. Copan city museum.

The first event in this series, the burning of Xkuy by the Copán king, Waxaklajun Ub'ah K'awil, is mentioned only on the cylindrical fragment in the Copán city museum (Fig. 2). Both hieroglyphic texts as well as physical evidence document the intentional destruction of sites by fire throughout the Maya area (Inomata 1997; Stuart 1995). In many cases, the burning of enemy centers resulted in the integration or consolidation of smaller sites into larger polities (see Martin and Grube 2000:76). The mention of such an event is unusual in the texts of Copán, though warfare is a familiar iconographic theme there, especially during the Late Classic period (Baudez 1986; Fash 1988).

The next event involving Xkuy occurs long after the defeat of Waxaklajun Ub'ah K'awil, on November 24, 762, mentioned on three monuments (Fig. 3). In each, the subject is the Xkuy ajaw K'in Kuch B'ahlam, who acts under the auspices of K'ahk' Tiliw. The outlines of glyphs from Stela E and Altar P' suggest that the event is the receiving of something, while Stela E seems to indicate that this object is a palanquin. At Tikal, palanquins are frequently associated with warfare,

sometimes being displayed as trophies (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Martin 1996). If this interpretation of the Quiriguá texts is correct, then K'in Kuch B'ahlam may have had the role of a military leader under the Quiriguá king.

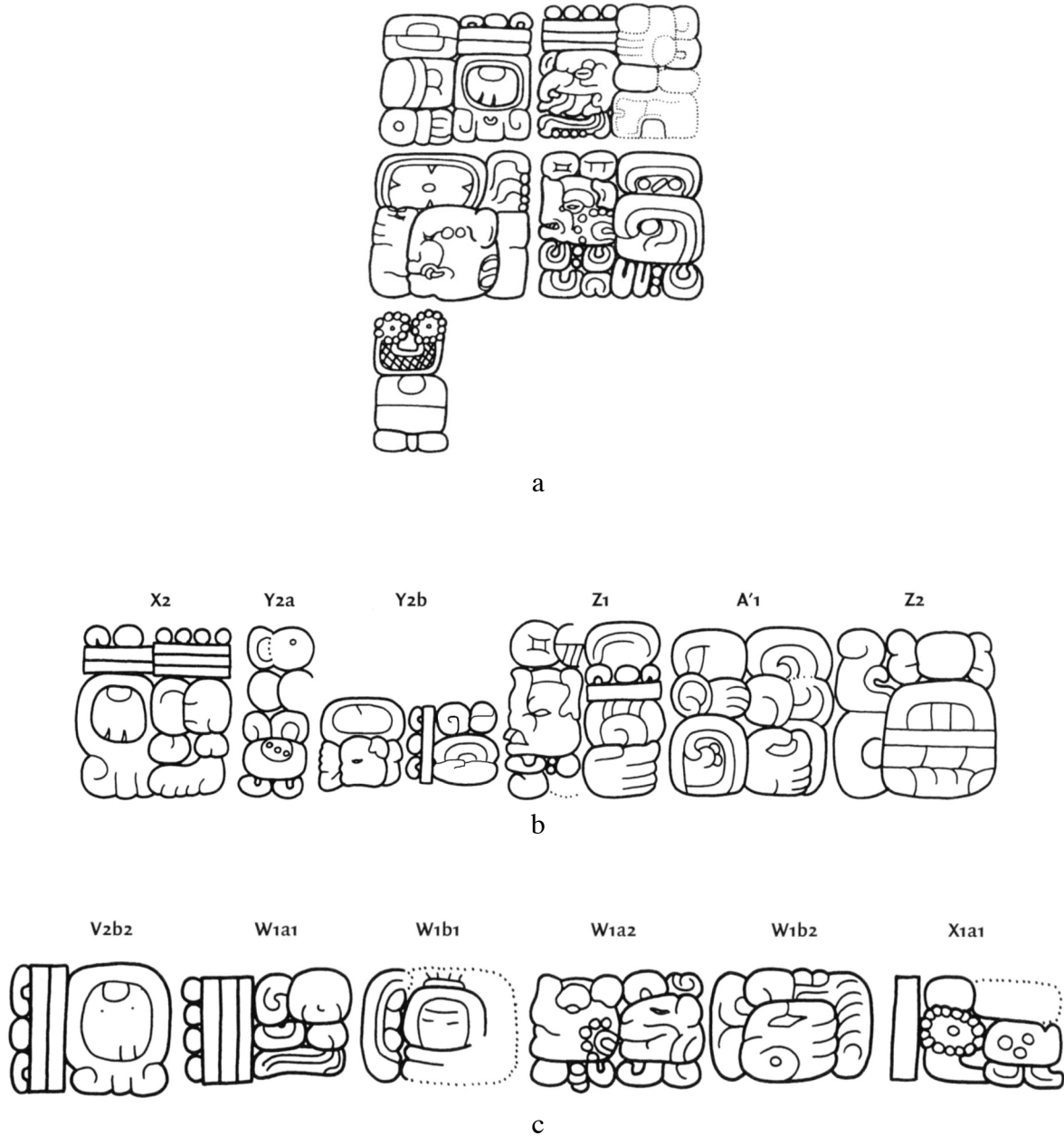


Figure 3. Event of November 24, 762. a. QRG Stela E; b. QRG Alt. O'; c. QRG Alt. P'.

The next two events involving the Xkuy ajaw K'in Kuch B'ahlam occurred in different ritual contexts, but both involve the act of "witnessing." On Stela E, the Xkuy ajaw appears as subject of a secondary verb *yilaj*, which follows a period-ending ritual conducted by K'ahk' Tiliw on January 20,

771 (Fig. 4). In Maya texts, the subjects of secondary verbal expressions reference high status persons, though not necessarily superior to the subject of the main verb (cf. Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006: 173). On Zoomorph G, K'in Kuch B'ahlam appears as the subject of a secondary verb *yilaj*, though in this case he is linked to a group of lords from a polity called To' (Fig. 5). The secondary verbal expression at Quiriguá follows a reference to the death of K'ahk' Tiliw on July 27, 785.

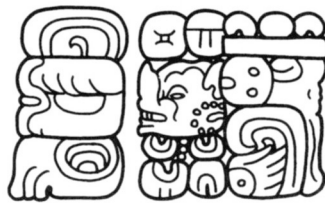


Figure 4. Period ending event of January 20, 771. QRG Stela E.

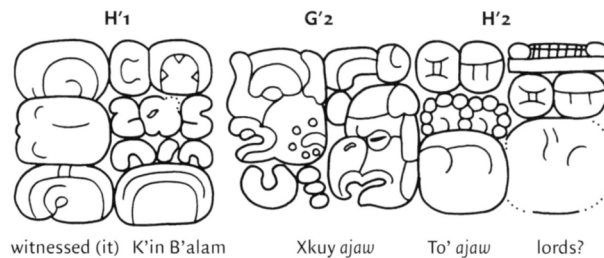


Figure 5. Xkuy ajaw as witness of death of K'ahk' Tiliw. QRG Zoo. G.

The final event associated with a Xkuy ajaw in the texts of Quiriguá appears on Altar O', in association with the date November 1, 786 (Fig. 6). This was just over a year after the death of K'ahk' Tiliw and the accession of his successor, Sky Xul. The text mentions that an unknown prisoner was captured, and that the skin and Tlaloc mask of the Xkuy ajaw was received. A poorly understood series of tz'olk'in positions and events appears in the subsequent blocks, followed by a reference to the overseeing of these rituals by Sky Xul.

Though it is rarely mentioned at other sites, the ritual presentation of a skin and Tlaloc mask is depicted on the "Jonuta" panel from the Palenque region (Fig. 7; Miller and Martin 2004: 85). This monument shows a standing personage, possibly a Teotihuacan god or deity impersonator, at center, being offered regalia by kneeling supplicants. On the right is a figure dressed as God L, who offers a bowl containing a Tlaloc mask. On the opposite side, the Palenque ruler K'inich Kan B'ahlam II holds a bowl which may have contained the skin. The text adjacent to this figure states that the skin and Tlaloc mask of Kan B'ahlam are "made ajaw." Though the complete significance of this ritual is elusive owing to damage to the panel, the relationship of this rite to divine supplication through Teotihuacan-style offerings is clear. There is no evidence from Palenque or elsewhere that this ritual signified the political subjugation of the bearer of the skin and Tlaloc emblems.

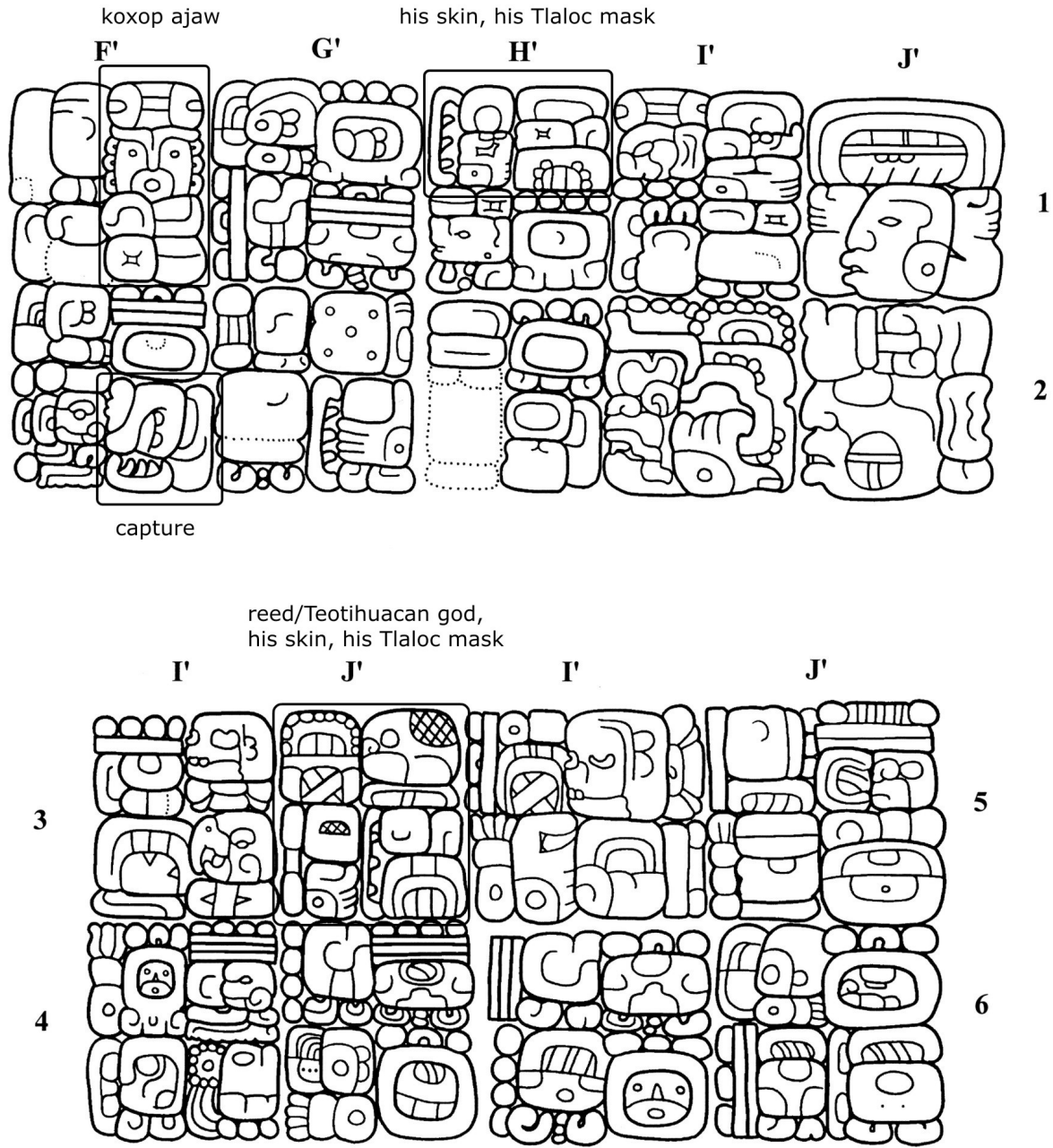


Figure 6. Events of November 1, 786. QRG Alt. O'.

A similar ritual may be recorded at Quiriguá, in which the Xkuy ajaw presented skin and mask to a Teotihuacan deity. This is further implied by a statement which appears on Altar O' in the blocks following the initial reference to the receiving of the skin and Tlaloc mask (Fig. 6; I'3-J'4). Here we read of the death of an entity called Yi'hk'in At, followed by *puh k'uhil* ('reed' or 'Teotihuacan god'; see Stuart 2000), then a second reference to 'his skin' and 'his Tlaloc mask'. This takes place on March 22, 786, under the authority of the incense-scatterer, understood as Sky Xul. The timing of this event only 162 days after the accession of Sky Xul further suggests the execution of a ritual

sequence tied to the king's inauguration. Similar rituals are recorded on Dos Pilas Stela 8, in association with the accession of the ruler Itzamnaj K'awil. This text mentions the receiving of a staff as well as another event involving a skin and a Tlaloc mask that was overseen by patron divinities. Thus, rituals of deity veneration using Teotihuacan-related imagery may have had widespread associations with royal accession.

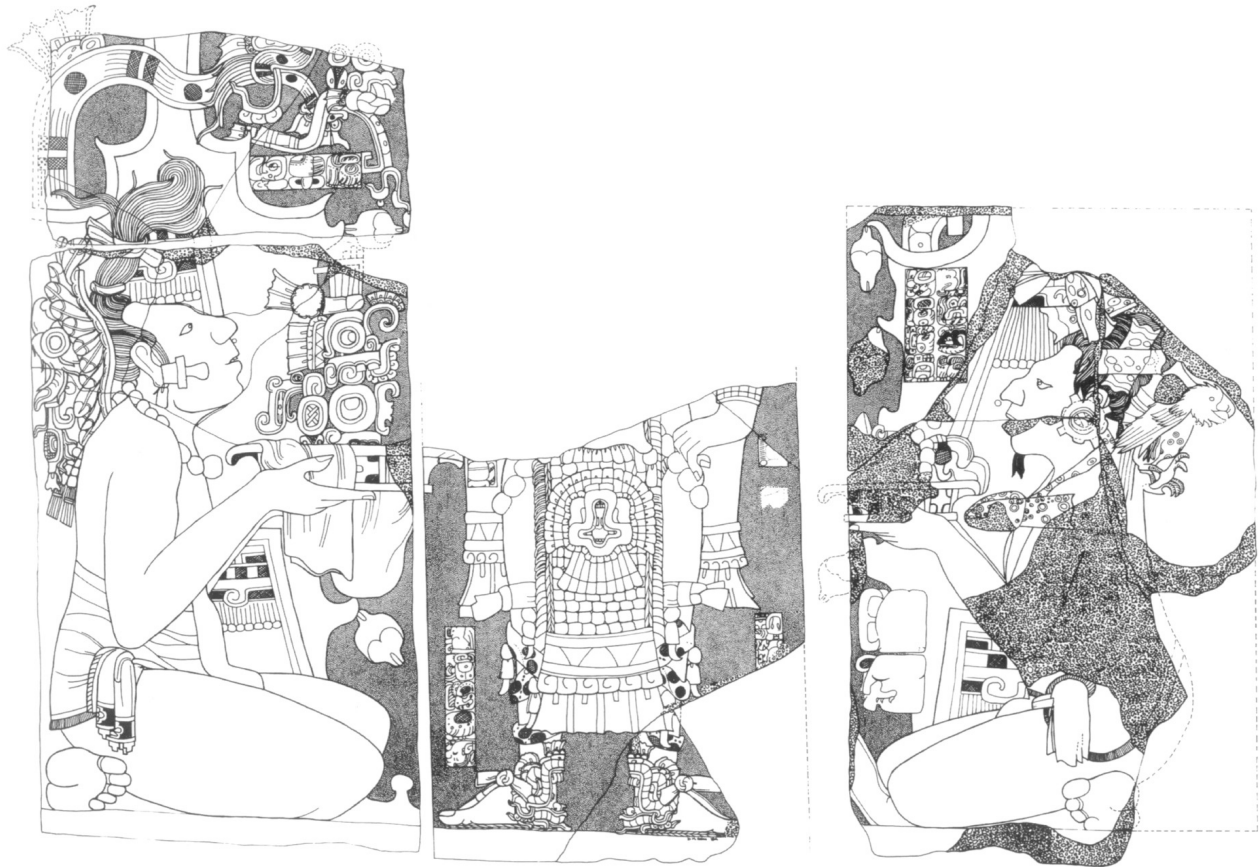


Figure 7. The Jonuta panel, after Miller and Martin (2004: 85).

In summary, the texts at Quiriguá and Copán make reference to a series of events involving Xkuy, which take place over a long period of time. The first is clearly a war, which may have brought the smaller site into the sphere of Copán. However, the later events are more difficult to interpret in the context of southeastern regional politics. In previous publications, I emphasized the competitive aspect of this relationship, following the defeat of the Copán king by Quiriguá in 738 (Looper 1999, 2003). Because Xkuy had been previously victimized by Copán, it stood to reason that an alliance between Quiriguá and Xkuy might represent a challenge to Copán's kings. However, a case could be made in support of an alternative hypothesis, particularly that Xkuy functioned as a mediator between Copán and Quiriguá dynasts after 762.

For instance, it is interesting to note that the first ritual involving the Xkuy ajaw, K'in Kuch B'ahlam at Quiriguá (the "palanquin" event) takes place less than a year before the accession of Yax Pasaj at

Copán. Further, on Quiriguá Altar O' is a reference to a personage entitled *koxop ajaw*, who is involved in an event on May 30, 778. At Copán, the bench from Structure 9N-82 mentions a *koxop ajaw*, acting on September 6, 773 or July 6, 781 (Plank 2003: 327; Stuart, Grube, and Schele 1989). Copán Altar W', a monument dedicated around the same time as the bench, refers to a personage called Mak'ab' Chanal Ik kox(op) (Plank 2003: 329). The appearance of the *koxop* toponym on these monuments may indicate some connection between Quiriguá and Copán during this period. Finally, there are enigmatic references to Copán ajaws on Quiriguá Altars O' and P', in association with the dates March 19, 786 and April 25, 790.

Also suggestive is the iconic relationship of the glyphic compounds which refer to Xkuy and Copán, both of which feature prominent bat heads. Rather than being an arbitrary spelling convention, this usage might be interpreted as a visual statement of the affiliation of Xkuy with the Copán state. The repeated appearance of the "bat" sites on the Quiriguá monuments between 771 and 795 may reflect the political significance which derived from alliances within the Copán sphere of influence.²

This interpretation is consistent with recent thought concerning the politics of Copán during the reign of Yax Pasaj. As has long been noted, during this period, numerous Copán-style monuments and texts appear in the suburban house compounds of the Copán "secondary tier" nobility, as well as at sites such as Los Higos. Scholars usually interpret this as a symptom of the failing power of the Copán monarch and the usurpation of royal prerogatives by wealthy secondary nobles (e.g. Fash 2001; Martin and Grube 2000; Schele and Freidel 1990).

However, I am persuaded Shannon Plank's (2003) suggestion that royal patronage of art and architecture at these locales was part of a drive by Yax Pasaj to counteract political fragmentation. Both art style and standardized format, as well as texts which refer to Yax Pasaj himself, seem to be powerful acknowledgments of centralized authority (see also Maca 2002). In fact, Plank (2003: 335) argues that the benches from Structures 9N-82 and 9M-146 which name Yax Pasaj, were dedicated around the same time as Structure 10L-11. This was followed by a massive building campaign in the site center, involving the construction of Structure 10L-21A, a refurbishment of Structure 10L-11, and probably also Structure 10L-16, not to mention the dedication of several altars, all before 775. Rather than a weakening of royal authority, then, we see in the years prior to 780 a push toward centralization, coming several decades before the final collapse of state control.

Viewed within the context of a general movement toward centralization at Copán, the references at Quiriguá to Copán and its satellites such as Xkuy may have been part of an attempt at détente between former enemies. This prompts speculation as to the origins of Yax Pasaj himself, whose texts emphasize his Palenque mother. In contrast, the identity of the father is not clear. The possibility of a Quiriguá connection (or even origin) of Yax Pasaj (Plank 2003: 336) makes sense of the references to lords of Xkuy in rituals conducted at Quiriguá during the reign of K'ahk' Tiliw and Sky Xul. It may also explain the prominence of inscribed zoomorphic altars at Copán during the reign of Yax Pasaj, as this monumental format was first developed at Quiriguá. Moreover, it sets the stage for joint period ending rituals conducted by Yax Pasaj and his Quiriguá counterpart, Jade Sky in 810, featured on the bench inscription of Quiriguá Structure 1B-1.

² This hypothesis is somewhat mitigated by the appearance of Emblem Glyphs based on the "bat" sign at Naachtun and Oxpemul, in southern Campeche (Grube 2005).

The suggestion that Xkuy and related polities were part of a process of reconciliation between Quiriguá and Copán is consistent with recent interpretations of the political affiliation of other sites in the southeastern region. In the eighth century, the region as a whole experienced an increase in complexity and diversification, as numerous sites initiated large-scale building projects. The end result of this process was the balkanization of the region, in which smaller centers increasingly competed with the formerly unrivaled Copán. Many centers, particularly in the Lower Motagua valley, employ design templates that contrast markedly with Maya models (Schortman and Nakamura 1991). Yax Pasaj's response to this vigorous assertion of local identities seems to have been to strengthen ties with sites located in the valleys between Copán and Quiriguá. This is manifested in the appearance of Copanec architectural and sculptural influences at sites such as El Paraíso during the mid-eighth century (Canuto and Bell 2003).

The inclusion of lords from minor centers associated with the Copán polity in the inscriptions of Quiriguá may therefore be tied to a specific political program initiated by the Copán rulers, calculated to address the threat of competition from neighboring non-Maya sites. However, Quiriguá's willingness to embrace this policy speaks to broader systemic changes in the nature of Maya politics at the end of the Classic period. In particular, monuments commissioned during this era show an increased emphasis on consensus and collective ritual action (Houston and Stuart 1998). This is likely to have been a response to the general increase in political competition characteristic of the Late Classic. In some areas, such as the Petexbatun, this led to endemic warfare and the rapid collapse of centralized authority (Demarest 2004). Southeastern rulers, in contrast, seem to have chosen a different path, characterized by conciliation and the "sharing" of subordinates. In this way, Yax Pasaj managed to avoid a renewal of the hostilities that had erupted between Copán and Quiriguá in 738.

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