Glyph Dwellers

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An Isthmian Presence on the Pacific Piedmont of Guatemala

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A dichotomy between Olmec and Maya art styles on the stone monuments of the Guatemalan site of Tak'alik Ab'aj was proposed a number of years ago (e.g., Graham 1979). Researchers now recognize a more nuanced division between Olmec and developing Isthmian/Maya[1] traditions (Graham 1989; Mora-Marín 2005; Popenoe de Hatch, Schieber de Lavarreda, and Orrego Corzo 2011; Schieber de Lavarreda 2020; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010). John Graham proposed the term "Early Isthmian" rather than "Olmec" to describe examples of the Preclassic texts of southern Mesoamerica (Graham 1971:134). In this paper the term "Isthmian" is restricted to the script found on the Tuxtla Statuette (Holmes 1907), La Mojarra Stela 1 (Winfield Capitaine 1988), and related texts.

Internal evidence within Isthmian texts themselves, specifically variation in both sign use and sign form, suggests that the origin of the Isthmian script dates significantly earlier than the long count dates on the two earliest known examples: La Mojarra Stela 1 and the Tuxtla Statuette (Macri 2017a). Two items of stratigraphic evidence from Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas show a presence of the script at that site, beyond the Gulf region, pushing the origin of the script even further back in time (Macri 2017b). This report considers several texts from the Guatemalan site of Tak'alik Ab'aj, specifically two monuments, that have long count dates only slightly earlier those on La Mojarra Stela 1 and the Tuxtla Statuette, to suggest an even broader geographic and temporal range for the Isthmian script tradition.

The Mesoamerican long count system of dating measures the number of days from a starting point of August 14, 3113 BCE (using the 584286 correlation (Martin and Skidmore 2012)), counting days, groups

[1] Maya refers to the Maya archaeological identity and Maya art and culture. Mayan refers to the family of Mayan languages.

of 20 days, 360 days, 20 x 360 days, and a cycle of 400 x 360 days. The number for the approximately 400 year cycle is the first one on carved monuments.

Table 1. Cycle 7 and Early Cycle 8 Long Counts. Day names are English glosses of the Nahuatl names; square brackets indicate that the sign for the day does not appear (or is not legible), but is calculated from the long count; years differ by one from calendar correlations that do not count a year zero.

LONG COUNT	DAY	YEAR	OBJECT	REGION	STATE, COUNTRY
7.16.3.2.13	6 Reed	35 BCE	Chiapa de Corzo St. 2	Chiapas	Chiapas, Mexico
7.16.6.16.18	6 [Flint]	32 BCE	Tres Zapotes St. C	Gulf	Veracruz, Mexico
7.18.____.12	12 Grass	2 CE+	El Baúl St. 1	Pacific	Escuintla, Guatemala
8.3.2.0.10	05 [Dog]	102 CE	Tak'alik Ab'aj St. 5	Pacific	Retalhuleu, Guatemala
8.4.5.0.17	11 [Movement]	125 CE	Tak'alik Ab'aj St. 5	Pacific	Retalhuleu, Guatemala
8.5?.____		140 CE+	Tak'alik Ab'aj St. 2	Pacific	Retalhuleu, Guatemala
8.5.3.3.5	13 [Serpent]	143 CE	La Mojarra St. 1	Gulf	Veracruz, Mexico
8.5.16.9.7	[5] Deer	156 CE	La Mojarra St. 1	Gulf	Veracruz, Mexico
8.6.2.4.17	8 [Movement]	162 CE	Tuxtla Statuette	Gulf	Veracruz, Mexico

Table 1 lists nine long count dates from cycle 7 and early cycle 8. The dates of several monuments differ from an earlier publication (Macri 2011:178). For example, El Baúl Stela 1 from Escuintla, Guatemala, has a calendrical format that differs significantly from known Isthmian texts. It begins, not with a long count, but with a day name and number, 7 Grass, followed by four small glyph blocks, followed by an eroded long count, beginning with 7. This is then followed by 18 or 19 for the 20-year period. Schele drew it as 19 (FAMSI #6906), but careful measuring of several photographs suggests that 18 is more likely (the second circle is a bit farther to the right than she drew it, leaving little room for two more circles). The remaining numbers, although sketched by Schele, appear to be illegible. The 7.18 (or 7.19) date is the earliest long count date known from Guatemala. El Baúl Stela 1 differs from the format of the others in that the glyph blocks in the second column are approximately equal height, suggesting paired double columns rather than the single column characteristic of Isthmian. The monument is too eroded to see much beyond the first column, but the overall format of the stela, when compared with the early Maya Hauberg Stela, appears more closely related to the Maya tradition (**Fig. 1**). No long count date appears on the Hauberg Stela, but Lacadena dates its carving to the Early Classic (Lacadena 1995:253). The date for Chiapa de Corzo Stela 2 is the earliest long count known. The cycle 8 date for Tak'alik Ab'aj Stela 2, once believed to be cycle 7, has been revised as explained below. This revised chronology is relevant to our examination of influences at the site of Tak'alik Ab'aj.

Fig. 1 (a) El Baúl Stela (from Wikipedia Commons), **(b)** Hauberg Stela (Princeton University Art Museum, #1999-232; photograph by Justin Kerr #152).

A major ceremonial center and a key participant in long distance trade, the site of Tak'alik Ab'aj on the Pacific piedmont of Guatemala contains architecture and stone monuments from the Middle Preclassic through the Early Classic period.[2] The over 300 stone monuments represent multiple cultural traditions (Dillon 2012; Graham 1989; Love 2007, 2010; Popenoe de Hatch, Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2011; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2010). Golitko and Feinman (2015) offer a network analysis of sourced obsidian assemblages for all of Mesoamerica between 900 BCE and 1520 CE that shows the major role Tak'alik Ab'aj played in obsidian trade from the earliest times. From the Middle Preclassic to the Early Classic period—their Period 3 (900–300 BCE) and Period 4 (250 BCE–250 CE), Tak'alik Ab'aj exhibited a high degree of association with both highland and central lowland Mayan sites. This finding corroborates recent archaeological work demonstrating the existence of widespread interregional interactions from as early as Middle Formative times (Inomata et al. 2013). Inomata (2017) calls the relationships between the southern Gulf Coast, central Chiapas, and the Pacific coast of Chiapas and Guatemala the Isthmian Interaction Sphere. It is not surprising then, to find at Tak'alik Ab'aj evidence of cultural items shared with both the Gulf and Chiapas regions.

[2] Approximate dates for Mesoamerican archaeological periods mentioned in this report: Early Preclassic 1900–1000 BCE, Middle Preclassic 1000–400 BCE, Late Preclassic 400 BCE–100 CE, Terminal Preclassic 100–250 CE, Classic 250–900 CE.

The categorization of the various monuments by Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2013), shows first the earliest monuments, carved in the round, most closely identified with Olmec traditions (800-700 BCE). A second phase (700–600 BCE) is composed of figures carved in high relief, followed by a period marked by low-relief carvings (600–400 BCE). The two categories of most interest to this study are from the Rocio phase (400-200 BCE) and the Ruth phase (200 BCE–150 CE). Rocio phase monuments that bear series of ornate faces and animal heads include Monument 11 (Graham and Porter 1989), the front of Altar 12, the side of Altar 48, and Stela 87 (Schieber de Lavarreda 2020). The signs on Altars 48 and 87 have cartouches around them, while signs on Altar 12 and Monument 11 do not. These elaborate sequences of glyphs, largely without affixes, appear to represent the names of rulers or deities. These icon-like characters, now recognized as a stage of Maya writing that predated the Classic Period, are arranged in single columns similar to two early texts discovered a Belize: the Kichpanha bone (Gibson, Shaw, and Finamore 1986), and the effigy clamshell pendant from Kendal (Schele and Miller 1986:79). Mora-Marín has demonstrated that the second sign in the central column of Tak'alik Ab'aj Monument 11 is equivalent to the third and fourth signs on the Kichpanha bone (Mora-Marín 2005:fig. 16). Unlike the stones of Tak'alik Ab'aj, the bone and pendant are both portable objects, whose locations of origin are unknown. Whether all four texts are contemporaneous, or whether they were created by speakers of the same language, or by participants in related cultural traditions is unknown. Two additional unprovenienced items possibly dated to the Terminal Preclassic or Early Classic include a set of four carved bone bells (Ishihara-Brito and Taube 2012), and a limestone sphere with five carved images, one on the top and four around the sides (K6582). The similarity of all these items to certain Tak'alik Ab'aj texts suggests a possible Maya influence on glyphic inscriptions during the Rocio phase. This glyphic tradition contrasts with texts and partial texts having a more linear quality that are associated the Ruth Phase, specifically Stelae 2 and 5.

On Mesoamerican monuments the latest of two or more dates is usually considered the dedicatory date of the monument, in the case of Tak'alik Ab'aj Stela 5, 125 CE. The period coefficients are not accompanied by period glyphs, that is, there are no signs for sets of 400 x 360 days, 20 x 360 days, 360 days, 20 days, or single days (in Mayanist terms, b'ak'tuns, k'atuns, tuns, winals, k'ins, respectively). This format is uncharacteristic of long count dates even on the earliest Maya monuments, for example: on Tikal Stela 18, 8.18.0.0.0 (396 CE), the long count is in double columns with period glyphs; on Uaxactun Stela 9, 8.14.10.13.15 (328 CE) and Stela 5, 8.17.1.4.12 (378 CE), the long counts are in single columns, but with period glyphs. Two notable exceptions include Polol Altar 11 (Lundell 1934), with an estimated date of approximately 8.0.0.0.0, and Blackman Eddy Stela 1, with a partially visible long count date that begins with 8.17 (Garber et al. 2004). Pestac Alto Stela 1 from Tonina with a long count date of 9.11.12.9.0 (665 CE) is an unusual example of a Maya monument without period glyphs having a long count date in the ninth b'ak'tun, that is, after 435 CE.[3]

Two monuments at Tak'alik Ab'aj, Stela 2 and Stela 5, contain long count dates in the same format as those found on La Mojarra Stela 1 and on the Tuxtla Statuette. The fragmented and eroded Stela 50 appears also to contain a partial long count date. On Stela 2 only the first number of the long count is present. The first number was earlier read as 7, but high definition digital photographs by the Alliance for Integrated Spatial Technologies at the University of South Florida, Tampa has demonstrated that the monument is indeed cycle 8 (8 x 400 x 360 days) (Doering and Collins 2011:figs. 30, 38, 39, 40). Graham's drawing by Porter shows 6 as the next number. Although that is not clear in the digital photograph of the whole monument, the image does suggest the presence of a circle or the edge of a bar (Doering and Collins 2011:fig. 30). Given the space between the bar and the lower bar or dot, it would seem that the

[3] Long counts without period glyphs can be found on Classic period pottery and in the Postclassic Maya fan-fold books. Typically, though, long counts on Classic monuments have glyphs for each of the periods.

second number is probably less than ten, possibly four or even six, as Graham's drawing shows. A cycle 8 date followed by a number greater than 2 and less than 10 would place Stela 2 within a few decades of the dates on Stela 5, e.g., 8.4.0.0.0 or 120 CE. Both stelae share similar initial long count signs, single-column format, an elaborate upper register, and similarly depicted human figures.

The face of Stela 5 has two long count dates, 8.3.2.0.10 (102 CE) and 8.4.5.0.17 (125 CE). Davletshin and Justeson independently proposed zero for the 20-day period, identifying the number directly above each day sign as a day coefficient (Davletshin 2002; Justeson 2001, 2010). Since there is no evidence for a sign for zero at this time period, the position for the 360-day period appears to have been suppressed. Davletshin asserts that the redundancy of the date in the 260-day cycle (the number in the count of thirteen and the day sign) allows for clarity for those familiar with the dating conventions. Graham initially considered this reading, but rejected it, saying "the suppression of another coefficient in a purely positional notation would surely seem to lead to chaos" (Graham, Heizer, and Shook 1978:92). The authors further acknowledge that either reading would not result in "a major chronological shift for the date of the text." Following this proposal, the advantage of assuming zero for the 360-day period allows for the 260-day coefficient to match the date given in the long count, 8.3.2.0.10 5 Dog and 8.4.5.0.17 11 Movement. This explanation would seem preferable to eliminating the numbers of the ritual count of thirteen.

On the front of Stela 5 (**Fig. 3**) two figures face two side-by-side long count dates. Each begins with an initial scroll, MS98 and a possible year sign, MS72 (Macri 2017c; Macri and Stark 1993), followed by bar-dot long counts, the day coefficient and the day sign. The remaining text on the front of the monument is almost completely eroded. Photographs and a drawing by James Porter provide outlines of the glyph blocks. The 3D model by Doering and Collins offers a detailed image of Stela 5, best viewed on-line at: https://sketchfab.com/models/be12a7e7fa7f48d3a2521b7548e4f227.

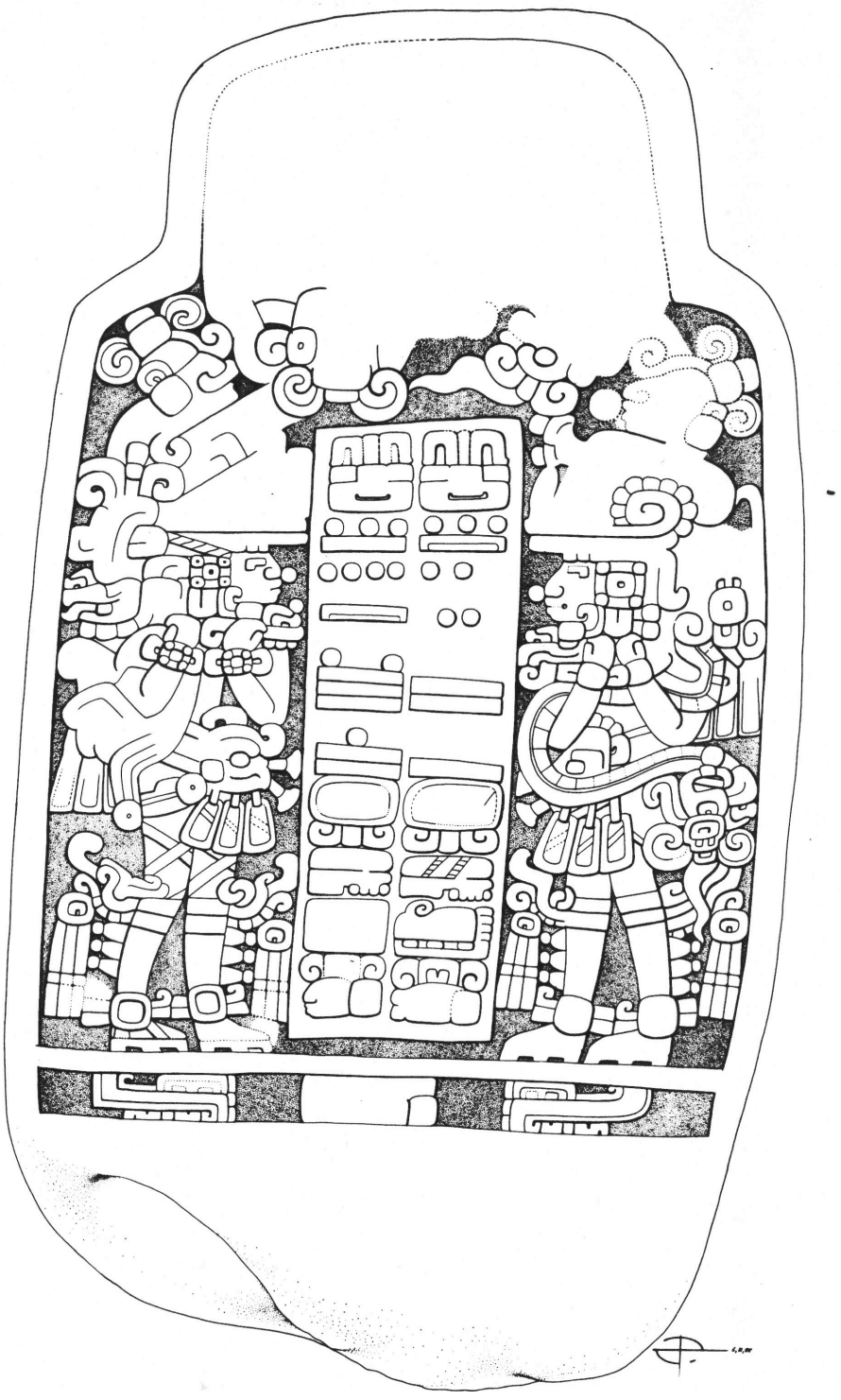

Fig. 3. Tak'alik Ab'aj Stela 5. Drawing by James Porter, with permission from John Graham.

The day signs appear directly beneath their coefficients, within a typical trilobed day-sign cartouche. Although weathered, the first glyph following the day sign position for both dates is of interest here. It

does not appear to represent any known Maya grapheme (Macri and Looper 2003). As drawn by Porter, the two signs have a horizontal line across the middle, and appear to have a division along the bottom edge, together with several smaller notches. Although the signs are clearly eroded, their outlines appear to resemble examples of the Isthmian sign MS169, that has notches on the bottom, an “eye-like” shape above a horizontal line across the center, and another oval/square shape below the line (**Figs. 4, 5**).

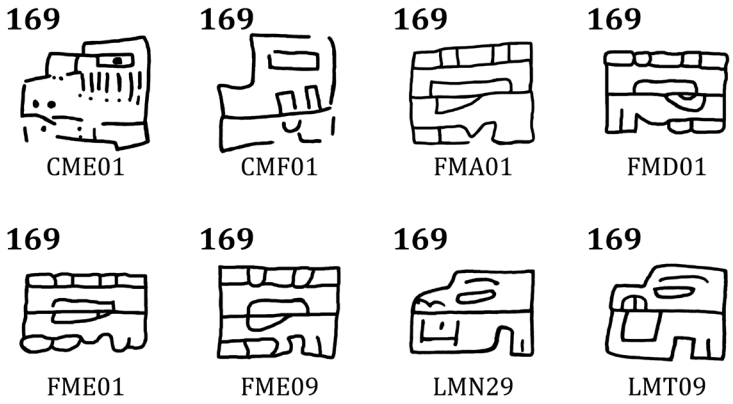

Fig. 4. Examples of Isthmian sign 169. CM=Ceramic Mask; FM=Stone Mask; LM=La Mojarra Stela 1.

Fig. 5. Signs directly following the day glyphs, Tak'alik Ab'aj St. 5. Photograph courtesy of John Graham.

MS169 occurs on three Isthmian inscriptions. The sign appears on the Stone Mask as the first glyph on columns A, D, and E, and a fourth time within column E (**Fig. 6, 7**). Because of its position at the head of three columns, Houston and Coe refer to it as an "initial sign" (Houston and Coe 2003).

Fig. 6. Sign from the Stone Mask, E1. Photograph courtesy of Michael Coe.

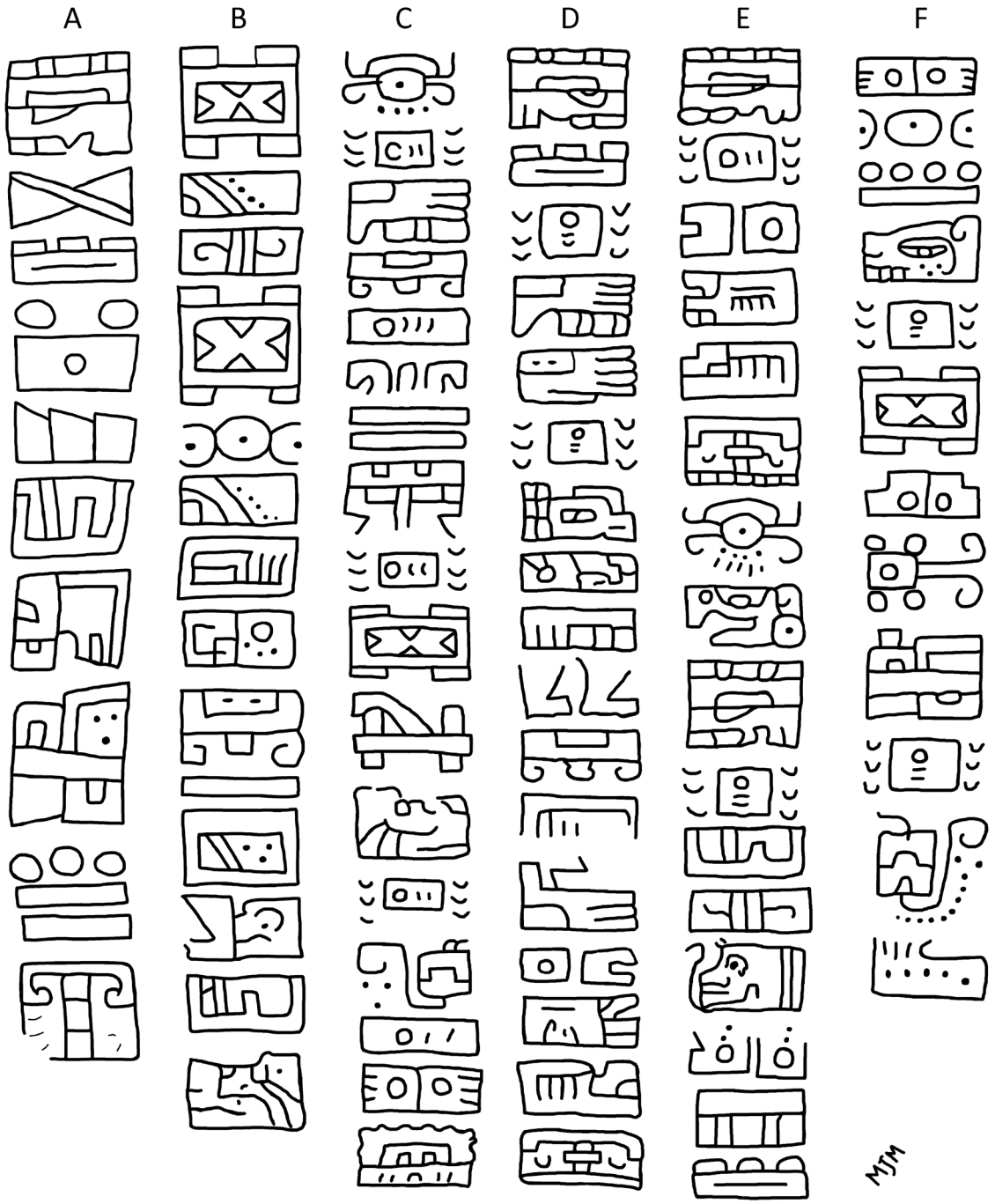

Fig. 7. The Stone Mask. Drawing by the author.

Lacadena (2010:1028) was the first to suggest that the sign resembles the initial sign on the stone mask. In fact, the sign MS169 also occurs twice on La Mojarra Stela 1, once within a clause in column N, LMN29, and once directly following a calendrical statement in column N at LMT9 (Winfield Capitaine 1988:fig. 14). Variants of this "initial" sign also appear on the Ceramic Mask , as the first sign in columns E and F, again in initial position (**Fig. 8**; Méluzin 1995).

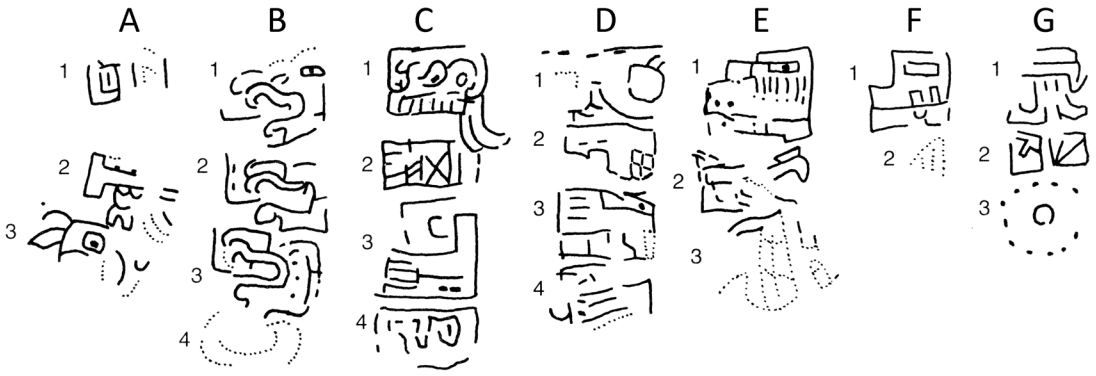

Fig. 8. The Ceramic Mask. Drawing by Sylvia Méluzin (1995).

The two signs immediately following the day signs on Tak'alik Ab'aj Stela 5 occur at the beginning of a column of a text, immediately following a calendrical statement. If indeed these initial signs on Tak'alik Ab'aj Stela 5 are variations of the MS169, this, along with the overall format of the long count date suggests an association with the Isthmian script, rather than with the Maya tradition.

Texts on the sides of Stela 5 appear to some researchers similar to what one would find on a Classic Maya monument (e.g., Mora-Marín 2005). However, the human figures on the front and sides, while having some similarity to figures on Classic Maya monuments, clearly pertain to an early tradition. The figures may not have been carved at the same time as the glyphs on the sides, and in any case do not necessarily represent the same script as that found on the front. The placement and shapes of the side glyphs are more fluid than the two angular single columns of signs on the front. So the texts on Stela 5 may well exhibit two styles of writing. The mixing of signs from the Maya and Isthmian traditions within a single text can be seen in the incised texts on Kaminaljuyu Monument 10 (Macri 1991; Mora-Marín 2005).

Davletshin offers the two columns on the front of Stela 5 as evidence of its Mayan identity (Davletshin 2014:15). His observation fails to distinguish, however, between paired columns where the reading order is top to bottom, left to right, across two columns, and the two single columns of signs that are placed side by side on Stela 5. In fact, these two initial series dates are better compared with the two initial series dates paired on the front of La Mojarra Stela 1. Lack of any period glyphs following the long count coefficients, though not proving an Isthmian identity, is another significant difference between Stelae 2 and 5 and Mayan texts (exceptions noted above).

Some of the signs on the sides of Stela 5, however, may be Mayan, suggesting caution in drawing conclusions about what surely was a complex relationship between the early Isthmian and Maya traditions. Several researchers have observed that at least one the glyphs on the sides of the stela appears to be Mayan: a possible glyph for *ajaw* followed by the Maya glyph for **wa** (Davletshin 2014; Lacadena 2010; Mora-Marín 2001, 2005:85). Given the complex relationships between various traditions at this site, two scripts on the same monument would not be wholly unexpected. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, several pieces of evidence suggest that the inscription on the front of Stela 5 is Isthmian. Lacadena leaves open the question of whether the language or languages of Tak'alik Ab'aj were Mayan or Mixe-Zoquean (he equates this language family with the Isthmian script). Mora-Marín (2005:85) points to similarities between the figures on Stela 5 and a figure on an unprovenienced jade belt plaque as evidence of a Maya presence. Further, Fields and Tokovinine (2012:187) point to similarities between the leggings of the figure on Stela 5 and those on a figure on the San Bartolo

Murals. The importance of these similarities should be considered in the light of iconographic features that the figure on La Mojarra Stela 1 shares with Late Preclassic Maya iconography.

The elaborate signs from the Rocio period appear to be part of an early Mayan tradition. This is based on similarities with several examples of pre-writing from Late Preclassic texts. The imagery on Stela 2 and 5, while bearing a similarity to early Maya depictions suggest an Isthmian intrusion at Tak'alik Ab'aj toward the end of the Late Preclassic period, the Ruth phase. Although Mora-Marín (2005:79) argues that Tak'alik Ab'aj writing was undoubtedly Mayan, differences between carved monuments from the Rocio and Ruth phases strongly suggest the possibility of at least two scribal traditions, offering evidence of a significant non-Mayan presence.

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