

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD OF KINGSHIP AT QUIRIGUA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CLASSIC PERIOD DYNASTIC RECORD THROUGH MONUMENTAL SCULPTURE

Zoe Niesel
Department of Anthropology
Southern Methodist University - Iota of Texas

Located in the floodplain of the Motagua River, the site of Quirigua is known for its beautiful and well-preserved monumental architecture and sculptures. Though occupying a strategic position between the highlands and the coast of the Caribbean, Quirigua remained a relatively small and compact center throughout its history. At the city's peak, the population would not surpass 5% of that of the great center of Tikal (Ashmore 453). Furthermore, unlike the larger centers of the Peten, Quirigua was not a great urban center, but instead served as a ceremonial and economic hub for a dispersed rural population. The entire site occupies an area of about 4 square kilometers, but the monumental architecture and raised, carved monuments are focused in a site core that covers 0.5 square kilometers (Sharer, *Quirigua* 1). Despite its extremely fertile location and access to traded resources, Quirigua developed slowly and unsteadily, including a brief collapse period, before reaching a ceremonial and architectural climax in the 8th century AD (Looper 2). This Late Classic florescence was characterized by using public art to celebrate local kingship and power, and lead to the large and intricate public works that characterize the site of Quirigua.

Due to the alluvium floodplain deposits which now bury the remains of Early Classic settlement at Quirigua, very little is know about the first three centuries of occupation. Later historical reconstructions from the 8th century begin the history of the site at 426 AD (Martin and Grube 216). Monument 3, raised in 755 AD and located on the south side of Structure 1A-3, contains text that may refer to the earliest ruler at Quirigua (Sharer, *Quirigua* 31). Though carved over 300 years later, Monument 3 contains the earliest known point of historical reference for the site (Sharer, *Quirigua* 32). This date is consistent with further historical accounts that may link the founding of dynasty at Quirigua with the first king of Copan. Zoomorph P, an elaborate and flat monument dating to 795 AD, describes a *taali*, or coming, to a "Foundation House"¹ on September 6, 426 (Martin and Grube 216, Looper 36). Altar Q from Copan reveals that this was

also the date of the accession of the dynastic founder of Copan, Yax K'uk' Mo' (Martin and Grube 192, 216). Three days later, September 9, a stela was raised and the accession of the first king of Quirigua commenced under the authority of Yax K'uk' Mo' (Looper 36). References to the "Foundation House", or *wi te' naah*, correspond with the presence of the New Order and the installation of new elite rulers in the Peten under this campaign.

Settlement from the Early Classic period at Quirigua was focused in Group A, a hilltop along the banks of the Motagua River. Most of this region is now lost due to riverbed deposits that have covered the area (Sharer, *The Ancient Maya* 321). However, some ceremonial architecture has been found here, as well as on an earthen platform known as 3C-1 (Martin and Grube 216). Excavations in Group A have led to the discovery of Stela U, the earliest monument found at Quirigua thus far. The stela is approximately 2.7 meters high and displays the "wrap around" style² characteristic of Quirigua's carved monuments (Sharer, *Quirigua* 70). This stela describes the third king of Quirigua, Ruler 3, and the rear of the stela provides a fairly well-preserved Initial Series date of 9.9.3.8.0, or 478 AD (Martin and Grube 216, Sharer, *Quirigua* 70). The two columns of hieroglyphic text describe the completion of a ritual done by the king under the management of an individual with the west *kaloomte'* title³, most likely the ruler of Copan (Looper 40, Sharer, *Quirigua* 70). Ruler 3 is mentioned again on Monument 26, which was found at 3C-1 (Martin and Grube 217). The backside of the stela, which consists of two large fragments, dates the monument to 493 AD (Sharer, *Quirigua* 72). The stela portrays the fourth ruler of Quirigua, named Mih Toh, and bears a stylistic resemblance to Stela U (Looper 41). The continuing alliance between Quirigua and its overlord, Copan, can be seen in the stylistic elements of both of these stelae. Reference to rituals performed in the honor of Ruler 3, as well as the occurrence of maze iconography, link Monument 26 to ancestor worship, but the frontal portrait of Mih Toh closely resembles similar portraiture seen on Copan's fifth century Stela 60 (Looper 46). However, the clarity and simple lines of the Quirigua stelae are markedly different from the Copan stelae of this period, which, like the Early Classic Tikal stelae, are characterized by curving lines, diagonal forms, and varying textures (Looper 46-47).

The sixth century was a time of troubles for Quirigua. Following the relatively active monument building of the fifth century, no known monuments have been found for the period between 495 and 653 AD (Looper 50). According to Martin and Grube, this period of crisis had its roots in a natural disaster, possibly a volcanic eruption or hurricane, which would cause the Motagua River to breach its banks and flood the river valley (217). However, the political situation in the Peten may have been another cause for this quiet period at Quirigua.

The accession of the Lady of Tikal to the throne of Tikal in 511 AD began a period of economic and military defeat at the great Peten center. With the collapse of Teotihuacán and the defeat by Calakmul, Tikal entered its Hiatus Period, which would have affected the Peten-influenced Quirigua (Martin and Grube 40,Looper 50). Another possibility for the crisis at Quirigua is that of an attack. Though the potential attacker is unknown, the condition of Stela U and Monument 26 may point to a sixth or seventh century conquest. Both of these stela were broken into two fragments and the left eye of Ruler 4 on Monument 26 seems to be intentionally scratched away (Looper 50). The treatment of these monuments is similar to the treatment of Tikal's Stela 31, which was broken and destroyed during the conquest by Calakmul, (Looper 50).

The reawakening of Quirigua seems to begin in 672 AD, the dedication year of Altar L. Originally located on the plaza of the Ball Court, the altar is a three feet high disk made of rhyolite. It portrays a seated figure, Ruler 5, within a cartouche that forms an Ahau glyph (Sharer, Quirigua 64). Altar L documents the continuing relations between Copan and Quirigua by mentioning Copan's 12th king, Smoke Imix (Martin and Grube 217). During this period, Copan was continuing a campaign of consolidation that had begun under B'utz Chan. The mention of Smoke Imix on Altar L may be linked to Copan's attempt to bring Quirigua more firmly under its control, while expanding its influence to other sites such as Santa Rita (Looper 52).

Today, the site of Quirigua is dominated by seventh, eighth, and ninth century monuments, representing some of the largest in the Mayan world. These were all commissioned in a time of economic and artistic revival that began with the accession of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat⁴. Little is known about his early life, but it seems that he was a local lord who acceded to the throne in 724 AD (Martin and Grube 218, Looper 57). Details of his accession survive only in retrospective history on several stelae and altars commissioned years later. Stela E, dedicated in 771 AD and originally located on the northern Plaza Platform, is one of the monuments to commemorate the rise of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat to power. The total length of the stone shaft comprising the stela is 10.6 meters, making it the tallest in the Maya world (Sharer, Quirigua 36). It shows two portraits of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat, located on the north and south sides of the monument (Sharer, Quirigua 36). Both portraits show the king in elaborate headdresses with a scepter across his chest (Sharer, Quirigua 36). The text on the monument records the accession of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat under the auspices of Waxaklajun Ub'ah K'awil, the ruler of Copan (Looper 57). Like his predecessors, the early part of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat's reign would occur under the political dominance of Copan.

Records from the first twenty years of the reign of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat seem dedicated to enhancing the power and supernatural ability of the local king. Even before the rebellion against Copan, K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat oversaw major architectural projects in the city's main acropolis (Looper 57). In addition to newly commissioned buildings, K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat also initiated a remodeling of the site core. This reworking of the core, including the main acropolis of Quirigua, seems to mirror the architectural ambitions of the king of Copan, Waxaklajun Ub'ah K'awil (Looper 64). The sculptured monuments that accompanied this surge in public architecture are focused on supernatural rituals conducted by the king in an attempt to establish a supernatural identity (Looper 57). Two such monuments, Altars M and N, both dedicated in 734 AD, represent the emergence of the political and supernatural power of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat. Both of these small altars are made of rhyolite stone and were found on the eastern edge of the Ball Court (Sharer, Quirigua 54). Forming a design similar to the "table altar" from Piedras Negras, the two were found used as a supporting base for Altar L. It is unlikely that this was the original placement of the three altars, and rearrangement in the ninth century is probably the cause of this unusual positioning (Looper 58).

Altar M is formed as the rounded head of what appears to be a jaguar, and its inscription contains the early titles of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat. On this monument, the king is named as the "black Copan ajaw" and "south kaloomte" (Looper 59). These titles give valuable insight into the politics between vassal Quirigua and the overlord Copan. Once mistaken for the Copan emblem glyph, the "black Copan ajaw" title is related to earlier inscriptions from both Copan and Quirigua, such as Stela 2, that also make use of the "black" title. The use of this title seems to show the king's origin in one of the provinces of the region under the political authority of Copan (Looper 59). The use of the title "south kaloomte" is the first use of this title by a lord of Quirigua. In the region, it was previously used only by kings of Copan, such as mentioned on Stela U. The use of this title (and the omission of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat's status as vassal) on Altar M speaks to the tensions in the relations between vassal and ruler (Looper 74).

In keeping with his grand architectural design, K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat raised one of the most elaborate and ornate buildings in the acropolis during his early rule. Called Structure 1B-2, the building was later dwarfed by its neighbors Structure 1B-1 and Structure 1B-3 (Sharer, The Ancient Maya 323). Like Altar M, the building is a proclamation of the growing power of Quirigua and its ruler, and undermines Quirigua's status as the vassal of Copan. Initially, the structure may have served as the palace and living area of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat (Sharer, Quirigua 87). However, the rhyolite carvings and embellishments give the building a sacred meaning and function. Particularly noteworthy are the symbols that

point to Structure 1B-2 as a sacred mountain, or creation place. The cornice of the structure is decorated with maws that are traditionally found on Classic Maya temples, especially on temples that symbolically serve as the Creation Mountain (Looper 66). In addition, the toponyms on the walls of Structure 1B-2 seem to make reference to the Five-Flower place, a supernatural place that is identified with both the realm of the dead and the holy creation place (Looper 68). The combination of the Creation Mountain iconography on the cornice, references to the Five-Flower place, and the reoccurring maize foliage imagery lend evidence to the theory that K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat raised the building to represent a "local maize-mountain," or a sacred Creation Mountain (Looper 72). By raising his own Creation Mountain, the king of Quirigua hoped for the city to become a sacred center in its own right. This action would have been interpreted as an attempt to turn Quirigua into a growing power in the southeast, and would have been architecturally representative of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat's attempts to reclaim political independence (Looper 74).

The artistic and architectural growth and revival that accompanied the early reign of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat would set the stage for what would immortalize him in the history of his city, the defeat of his overlord at Copan. In 738 AD, K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat captured and sacrificed Waxaklajun Ub'ah K'awil, restoring control of the Motagua River trade route to Quirigua (Demarest 233, Martin and Grube 219). This victory would lead to a rapid growth in population at Quirigua and in the Motagua River Valley (Martin and Grube 219). It would also be the inspiration for the tall and beautiful stelae that were raised in the acropolis during the period following Copan's defeat. Following his victory, K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat spent the remainder of his rule remodeling Quirigua to reflect the new economic power that came with control of the important Motagua trade route (Sharer The Ancient Maya 328). In some ways, this new architecture and artistry was an attempt to mimic the site of Copan's former splendor and glory, as well as assert the importance of Quirigua as a regional capital (Martin and Grube 220).

History of the conflict between Quirigua and Copan is purely retrospective and only appears on sculptured monuments years after Copan's defeat. Following the important events of 738 AD, it was seven years before recorded history reappeared at the city of Quirigua. This quiet period in the historical and artistic record may mean that the site was undergoing massive economic and political restructuring (Looper 88). Stela I, raised in 800 AD to celebrate the accession of Quirigua's sixteenth ruler, Jade Sky, makes reference to stela raised to celebrate the period endings of 9.15.5.0.0 and 9.15.10.0.0, but neither of these stela have been found (Sharer Quirigua 47-48, Looper 88). The dedicatory date of 746 AD makes Stela S the earliest stela found for the time period following Quirigua's rebellion (Sharer Quirigua 66). Though found in Group 7A-1, the original site of the monument

may have been Platform 1A-3 in the Great Plaza (Looper 88). Stela S is badly eroded, but contains the portrait of a human figure holding a scepter. This is most likely the earliest known portrait of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat, and is similar in style to early generation Quirigua stelae, such as Monument 26 (Sharer Quirigua 67, Looper 88). At 8.5 feet, Stela S is also the beginning of stelae and monument enlargement at Quirigua (Looper 90).

To accompany his new economic and political power, K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat sought to give a supernatural element to the power of his royal line, as well as promote the growth of Quirigua as a sacred creation center. This goal is manifested in the king's legendary stelae, which showed the dominance of his rule through his ability to master the supernatural realm. Furthermore, these stelae gave particular attention the creation of the universe and the ability of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat to cross the boundaries of time to draw on ancient events (Martin and Grube 221). The erection of three monuments on Platform 1A-1, Stela A, Stela C, and Zoomorph B, are three such monuments that connect K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat with events in ancient history, as well as grant him supernatural powers linked with the creation of the universe.

Dedicated in 775 AD, Stela C not only reinforces the divinity of the king of Quirigua, but also contains the most elaborate and complete version of the Maya's creation story (Martin and Grube 222). The south face of Stela C features a portrait of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat in full headdress and costume (Sharer Quirigua 30). The king's outfit contains elements of warfare, including anklets that may be decorated with the head of the war serpent (Looper 164). Juxtaposed is the northern face of the monument, which features an aged, dancing anthropomorphic creature. A bird-like figure perched above this dancing deity may represent Itzamnaah, from whom thin cords emerge. These cords represent the cosmic umbilicus and correspond with an event from the *Popol Vuh* that describes the stretching of cords to form the pattern of the universe (Looper 168-170). The western face text of Stela C seeks to anchor the actions of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat into deep history. The text recounts a monument dedication commissioned by an early king of Quirigua over three centuries before the dedication of Stela C. The date of this ancient stela dedication appears at the same tzolk'in position as December 29, 775, the dedicatory date for Stela A and Stela C (Looper 165). The eastern text of Stela C relates the Mayan Creation story, beginning with the birth of the universe from the setting of the three hearthstones of creation in 3114 BC (Looper 165, Martin and Grube 222, UTEXAS).

The glorious reign of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat came to a quiet end on July 27, 785 AD (Martin and Grube 222). He left behind a legacy of economic and architectural revival at the site of Quirigua, and the kings following him

would live in the shadow of this man turned legend. His immediate successor, known as Sky Xul, continued the enthusiastic building in the main acropolis by constructing several elaborate and massive zoomorphs (Martin and Grube 223). His first of such monuments, Zoomorph G, paid homage to K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat and described the funerary rituals following his death. Zoomorph G was dedicated on November 6, 785 to celebrate the 9.17.15.0.0 period ending and features the head of a "Waterlily Jaguar" (Looper 187). Characteristics of *bufo marinus*, a sacred tropical toad, also appear in the form of scales and poison glands (Sharer [Quirigua](#) 43). A human figure emerges at each of the two ends of the monument, suggesting a possible "ancestral rebirth" (Looper 187). Text appears in panels on each side of the zoomorph and describes the death of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat, his funeral, and the inauguration of Sky Xul (Sharer [Quirigua](#) 44).

Two of Sky Xul's most beautiful monuments, Zoomorphs O and P, were raised in the Ballcourt Plaza late in his reign. Both these massive zoomorphs represent the Creation Mountain and feature crocodilian characteristics, but what is most impressive is the time in which they were dedicated (Martin and Grube 224). With dedicatory dates of 790 and 795, the monuments were raised at a time when other great Classic Maya centers had entered the Collapse Period (Martin and Grube 223-224). Despite retaining a continuing prosperity during this wave of collapse, the death of Sky Xul began the decline of Quirigua. The last named king in the dynastic sequence of Quirigua, Jade Sky, took the throne between 795 and 800 (Martin and Grube 224). The few monuments raised by this king are smaller in scale and feature significantly more condensed portraiture than the monuments erected by his predecessors. Jade Sky's Stela K is the shortest found at the site of Quirigua and is only 3.5 meters high (Sharer [Quirigua](#) 52). The stela depicts frontal portraits of Jade Sky and its inscription lacks the deep history present on the monuments of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoaat (Sharer [Quirigua](#) 53). However, it is symbolically similar to earlier Quirigua stelae, specifically Stela H. As on this early stela, Stela K features a representation of the double-headed serpent with images of God K emerging from the jaws (Looper 196).

The more modest monuments of Jade Sky show the inability of the king to call upon the enormous resources that were at the disposal of the previous king, Sky Xul (Martin and Grube 224). This inability to construct the elaborate displays of power necessary to divine kingship corresponded with the declining power of the divine kings and the impending collapse of the dynasty at Quirigua. The last known date from the site comes from inscriptions on Structure 1B-1 in the acropolis (Looper 196). The text commemorates the 9.19.0.0.0 period ending rituals done in association with the king of Copan, Yax Pasaj Chan Yoaat (Martin and Grube 225, Looper 196). However, this celebration between the two former rivals did not lead to a relationship, for the site of Quirigua was deserted over the next several years.

Though the Classic Period glory of the site had ended, it continued to be occupied until after 900 AD. A small center was established southwest of Quirigua and most likely continued to control the Motagua River trade (Sharer Quirigua 110). By 1250 AD, control of trade along the Motagua was transferred to the city of Nito, which continued as a powerful trade center until the Spanish arrival (Martin and Grube 225, Sharer Quirigua 110).

Footnotes

¹The “Foundation House” is associated with dynastic rituals in which rulers link their authority and power to the great Mexican city of Teotihuacán. Here it may also be associated with the *wi te’ naah*, the fire shrine of Teotihuacán.

²A monument representing the wrap around style would have a unified portrait of the king in his regalia displayed over three sides of a rectangular column. This style first appeared at Tikal and its appearance at Quirigua shows continuing interaction with the Peten.

³The *kaloomte’* title was reserved for the most powerful kings of Classic Maya centers. Its use was associated with the Entrada of Siyaj K’ahk and the hegemony of the Tikal-Teotihuacán alliance.

⁴Fire-burning Sky Lightning God

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