



Newly revealed hieroglyphs tell story of superpower conflict in the Maya world

By David F. Salisbury and Mimi Koumanelis
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Translation of recently unearthed hieroglyphic stairs on an ancient Maya pyramid in Guatemala provides dramatic evidence that two great Maya city-states and their allies were locked in a brutal superpower struggle that may have set the stage for the later collapse of the classic Maya civilization.

The newly translated stone hieroglyphs – complete with references to piles of skulls and flowing blood – were partially exposed last summer during a hurricane at the site known as Dos Pilas, deep in the Guatemalan rain forest. “The hundreds of new glyphs fill in a vital 60-year gap of unknown Maya history and clarify many of the political and military relationships of this critical period,” says Federico Fahsen, a noted Maya epigrapher and adjunct professor at Vanderbilt University.

Fahsen directed the team that uncovered, catalogued and deciphered the inscriptions, an effort supported by the National Geographic Society, Vanderbilt University, the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies and Guatemala’s Ministry of Culture.

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RESEARCH DETAILS

The 18-step hieroglyphic staircase, of which only eight steps were previously known, supports the theory that the Maya world in the seventh century was divided into two superpower blocs – one under the control of the city-state Tikal and the other dominated by Calakmul. Tikal, then known as Mutul, was located in what is, today, northern Guatemala, and Calakmul was about 60 miles further north, in Mexico.

The discovery of the glyphs is reported in the October 2002 issue of National Geographic magazine. The glyphs — among the largest texts ever discovered — detail how Calakmul, known as the “snake kingdom,” was involved in the wars that occurred in this part of the ancient Maya world. Previously, scholars working in the region viewed the conflict between Dos Pilas and Tikal as primarily a dynastic quarrel between two brothers. This theory was in accordance with the more traditional interpretation of the Maya states in this region as independent regional powers. The glyphs, however, reveal a very different story.

Written on the staircase is the actual history of Dos Pilas. It begins on the central section of the pyramid’s stairway with the birth of a king, Balaj Chan K’awiil, on Oct. 15, 625, and the establishment of Dos Pilas as a military outpost by the great city of Tikal, about 70 miles to the northeast, in 629. Dos Pilas was important to Tikal for its proximity to the middle stretch of the

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Pasión River, the superhighway of the Maya world. A stronghold in Dos Pilas allowed Tikal to exert control over this major trade route between the highlands and lowlands for coveted items such as jade, obsidian, quetzal feathers, and shells from the Caribbean.

As told by the glyphs, Balaj Chan K'awiil was installed as ruler of Dos Pilas by Tikal at the age of four. "Balaj Chan K'awiil became a very big warrior," says Fahsen. "He almost never stopped fighting and for many years was loyal to Tikal." According to the translations, the central section of the steps also tells the ceremonies that the young man went through, always as a friend of his brother, the ruler of Tikal, not as an enemy as previously believed.

Then, when the king was in his early 20s, Calakmul attacked and defeated Dos Pilas. After capturing Balaj Chan K'awiil, Calakmul put him back on the Dos Pilas throne as a "puppet king" who was allowed to keep his land in exchange for allegiance.

The degree of involvement of Calakmul came as a surprise to Fahsen. "When I read those glyphs, I had to blink to make sure I was reading it correctly," he says. "I had never heard of Calakmul actually invading and defeating the king of Dos Pilas. We thought that, at most, they may have had a weak alliance of some type."

The record continues to describe how Balaj Chan K'awiil, now loyal to Calakmul, launched a decade-long war against Tikal that ended in his victory. His forces sacked Tikal and brought its ruler — his own brother — and other Tikal nobles to Dos Pilas to be sacrificed. "This west section of the steps was very graphic," says Fahsen. "It says, 'blood was pooled and the skulls of the thirteen peoples of the Tikal place were piled up.' The final glyphs describe the king of Dos Pilas 'doing a victory dance,'" he adds. Following the victory over Tikal, Dos Pilas embarked on a campaign of conquest with Calakmul's backing and became a major regional power.

"Rather than being an independent actor as previously thought, it now appears that Dos Pilas was a pawn in a much bigger battle," says Arthur Demarest, Ingram Professor of Anthropology at Vanderbilt University, which helped sponsor the effort at Dos Pilas. "In today's terms, Dos Pilas was the Somalia or Vietnam of the Maya world, used in a war that was actually between two superpowers."

Fahsen and Demarest contend that the newly translated account supports the theory advanced by two Maya scholars — Simon Martin of University College, London, and Nikolai Grube of the University of Bonn — that this period in Maya history was a "long world war" between the Tikal and Calakmul superpowers. Although Maya scholars had earlier characterized the recorded conflicts between different Maya city-states as regional and unrelated, the new evidence from Dos Pilas "supports the more extreme versions of Martin and Grube's vision," says Demarest, who previously viewed their theory skeptically.

After evaluating the new material, Demarest now conceives of this period as a time when the Maya civilization was on the verge of moving to a higher level of organization and consolidating into a single empire. "However, this didn't happen. Instead, the giant war went back and forth. After Tikal was sacked, it eventually roared back and crushed Calakmul. And then the Maya world just broke up into regional powers, setting the stage for a period of intensive, petty warfare that finally led to the collapse of the Maya," says Demarest. By 760, Dos Pilas was abandoned.

The writing on the wall: A closer look at the glyphs

The Maya elite set their lives and times in stone, using the most sophisticated writing system ever developed in the ancient Americas. Several hundred of these symbols, known as hieroglyphs, have recently come to light at the Guatemalan site of Dos Pilas.

Among the largest Maya texts ever found, they were uncovered on the stairway of a pyramid, where they had been etched in the soft, karstic rock by a series of scribes. Possessing no metal, the scribes would have scratched out their stories using hard rocks.

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Epigrapher Federico Fahsen, adjunct professor at Vanderbilt University, who deciphered the text on the newly found 10 steps, said these glyph texts are extraordinary because they tell of not only the city of Dos Pilas' triumphs but also its setbacks and tragedies. Fahsen now believes Dos Pilas was part of a dramatic superpower struggle that may have contributed to the collapse of the Maya civilization.

Some of the detail of the steps:

- The central section spans the first 23 years of the life of a ruler known as Balaj Chan K'awiil, Fahsen says. Step 6 specifically describes his birth: "It came into being the day 8 IK' 5th of the month KEH when was born Balaj Chan K'awiil divine Mutul lord." (The abbreviations stand for the day and month of the Maya calendar, and "Mutul" is the city now known as Tikal.)
- Step 4 details the ceremony that led to Balaj Chan K'awiil taking the throne, in the year 635 – referred to as "the taking of the headband," Fahsen says. The glyphs report that he journeyed the 60 miles to Tikal – a long trip in ancient times – for the headband ceremony. Balaj Chan K'awiil's brother ruled at Tikal.
- The stairway's east section moves on to tell of a "star war" attack – under the dominance of Venus – on Dos Pilas by the king of the major power center of Calakmul in 658 and Balaj Chan K'awiil's flight to the city known today as Aguateca. Steps 6 and 5 tell of the conquests of Dos Pilas by Calakmul, displacing Tikal from this former sphere of influence.
- The west section spans 12 years, beginning with the wars between the brothers. The brother in Tikal forces Balaj Chan K'awiil to flee Dos Pilas for a place called CHAK-nah and then to flee again. Five years later Balaj Chan K'awiil returns with a vengeance, according to step 4, and defeats his brother on behalf of Calakmul. "Blood flowed and skulls of the thirteen peoples of the Tikal place were piled up," the glyphs say.
- Step 2 has Balaj Chan K'awiil in 682 doing a "victory dance" with Calakmul's king, his ally, to celebrate Balaj Chan K'awiil's nearly 60 years of life. The steps end with a note of domestic tranquility, the ruler recording the name of his wife, Ix Itzan Ajaw, and their child, his heir.

The story of the first 60 years at Dos Pilas ends here, but historians know that Tikal ultimately came back to crush Calakmul. Three more kings followed Balaj Chan K'awiil at Dos Pilas before the city was abandoned around 760.

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