



Notes on Accession Dates in the Inscriptions of Coba

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In this short paper I propose the identification of three historical dates in the inscriptions of Coba, Quintana Roo, Mexico, each corresponding to the accession of a different ruler of that important Classic Maya city. Coba's inscriptions, only some of which are published (see Graham and Von Euw 1997; Thompson et al. 1932) have yet to receive a systematic and detailed analysis, with the welcome exception of Gronemeyer's (2004) preliminary proposal of a series of rulers, whom he designated as Rulers A, B, and C. Here I would like to build on these earlier contributions by offering a few observations that might fill in a few gaps in Coba's murky historical record.

A New Date for Stela 4

The first point of discussion centers on Gronemeyer's "Ruler A," named on Stela 4 in the Grupo Macanxoc complex (Figure 1). The inscription on Stela 4, like so many others at Coba, is in terrible condition, although this did not prevent Thompson from placing its illegible Initial Series at 9.9.10.0.0 2 Ajaw 13 Pop (Thompson et al. 1932:146-147). So little is left of the opening date, however, that I see no good reason to follow Thompson's proposal. In fact, a few telling clues in better preserved parts of Stela 4's inscription help in establishing a more secure date for the stela and for the ruler who dedicated it.

One important hint appears in a single column of moderately preserved glyphs near the right edge of the stela's front, in column I (Figure 2). This includes a Distance Number (DN) and a Calendar Round (CR) date at blocks I4 through I7. After this, in blocks I8 and I9, is an accession verb phrase first noted by Gronemeyer (2004).

Unfortunately, neither the day sign nor the month glyph of the associated CR is obvious, but two factors are helpful in narrowing the possibilities of a reading. First, the number on the

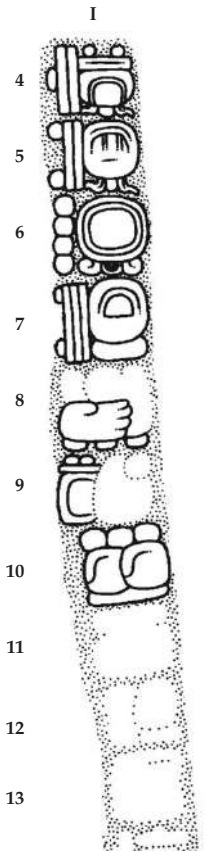


Figure 2. Accession phrase from Coba Stela 4. Drawing by Ian Graham (from Graham and von Euw 1997:31).

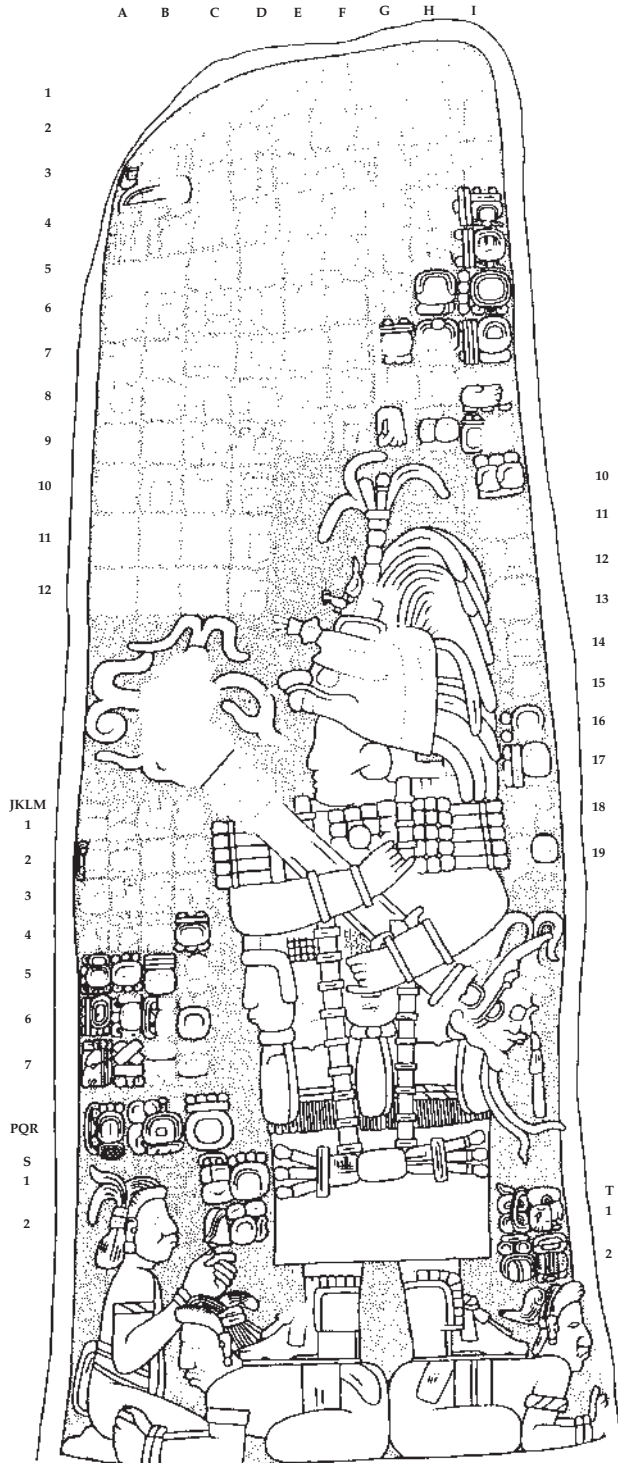


Figure 1. Coba Stela 4. Drawing by Ian Graham (from Graham and von Euw, 1997).

month glyph is without doubt 17, leaving only four day signs as a possibility: K'an, Muluk, Ix, and Kawak. The DN above the Calendar Round date looks to be 12.12.11 or less likely 12.7.11. As we will see later, a number of DNs in Coba's inscriptions are retrospective counts, calculated backward from Period Endings recorded as Initial Series dates. This may be the case here, for if we assume for the moment that the unreadable Initial Series was a Period Ending, the K'in number 11 in the DN would lead back from Ajaw to the ninth day, Muluk—one of the four days indicated by the coefficient on the month glyph. We might then narrow our options even further, for the Long Count placement of this 4 Muluk date would therefore end in 5.9 or 10.9 in the Winal and K'in positions. And the Tun position, counting 12 back from 0, 5, 10, or 15—all likely stations of a Period Ending record—would be 7, 17, 12, or 2. Taken together, I find only one solution satisfactory:

$$\begin{array}{r} 9.11.0.0.0\ 12\ \text{Ajaw}\ 8\ \text{Keh} \\ -\ 12.12.11 \\ \hline 9.10.7.5.9\ 4\ \text{Muluk}\ 17\ \text{Woh} \end{array}$$

There's good reason to think that the opening Initial Series of Stela 4 was read incorrectly by Thompson and should be placed some thirty years later in time, as 9.11.0.0.0 12 Ajaw 8 Keh. This is, I think, confirmed by another date recorded earlier in Stela 4's inscription, at the base of the first two columns of the text. There, at J6-K6, we find another CR date written as 9 ? 1 Mak. Before it is a DN clearly written as 3.0.2. This is most likely:

$$\begin{array}{r} 9.11.0.0.0\ 12\ \text{Ajaw}\ 8\ \text{Keh} \\ -\ 3.0.2 \\ \hline 9.10.16.17.18\ 9\ \text{Etz'nab}\ 1\ \text{Mak} \end{array}$$

The nature of the event recorded after this Calendar Round is not clear; while the verb at block J7 bears a vague resemblance to the "toothache" accession glyph (perhaps based on the verb root *joy*), not all of the customary elements appear with it, and it may not refer to the accession of a ruler. In any event, the 9 Etz'nab 1 Mak date helps to buttress the reading of the dates posited above, 9.11.0.0.0 and in turn 9.10.7.5.9 4 Muluk 17 Woh.

Although the published drawing in the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions does not indicate many details, photographs show that the CR date in column I is surely an accession, as Gronemeyer first pointed out. Blocks I8 and I9 show the telling phrase *k'ahlaj hu'n tu baah*, "the paper headband was fastened on him," or some approximation of it (Figure 2). Gronemeyer offered no calendrical context for this episode of Coba's history, which is understandable given the ambiguities in Thompson's reading of Stela 4's dates (following Thompson, he placed Stela 4 at 9.9.10.0.0). Now, how-

ever, I think we can reasonably conclude that the ruler's accession took place a bit later than previously supposed and can be assigned with some assurance to 9.10.7.5.9 4 Muluk 17 Woh, or April 6, 640 AD.

The later placement of Stela 4 still puts it in good agreement with other monuments found nearby in the Grupo Macanxoc. It also allows us to distinguish it from Stela 6, which bears a far clearer date of 9.9.10.0.0 2 Ajaw 13 Pop. In this scheme, Stela 6 would belong to the reign of a king who ruled prior to Gronemeyer's Ruler A. Perhaps we can now begin to revise that earlier ruler list and assign the king of Stela 6 the provisional designation of "Ruler A."

The Two Rulers on Stela 1

Stela 1 is the most famous of Coba's monuments, due to its remarkable record of the complete 3114 BC "era" date on its back, using 24 periods of what I call the "Grand Long Count," most bearing the coefficient 13 (Figure 3).¹ On the front of the monument the long inscription opens with the Initial Series 9.11.0.5.9 4 Muluk 17 K'ayab, a date that is relatively well preserved and was first identified by Thompson (Thompson et al. 1932:135). Importantly, this is the 13 Tun anniversary of the accession date I have proposed on Stela 4. Not enough detail survives in the verb phrase that follows to confirm any accession statement, but I doubt this can be a coincidence. Moreover, I see the commemoration of the king's 13 Tun anniversary on the throne as entirely appropriate in light of the repetitious "Grand Long Count" recorded on the stela's other side, with its sequence of twenty high periods set at 13. The anniversary record links his accession and reign to the far larger cosmic structure of the calendar.

Oddly enough, Stela 1 seems not to have been dedicated by the same king whose anniversary is celebrated in the Initial Series date and who oversaw the erection of Stela 4. This is strongly indicated by the presence of a second Long Count date in the front text of Stela 1, 9.12.10.5.12 4 Eb 10 Yax (see Thompson et al. 1932:135), which is almost certainly an accession of the king who reigned after the king of Stela 4. Gronemeyer read this as a possible death date for his "Ruler B," but on close inspection it is surely another inauguration record, with an extended "head band fastening" statement from G14-H15 (Figure 4). The name phrase of the ruler, like several at Coba, is introduced by the enigmatic but important *kaloonte'* title at H16. The name itself is partly illegible, but one component at H17 looks to include **CHAN-na** and **YOPAAT**, providing the partial name ? *Chan Yopaat*.

¹ Two or possibly three other Coba stelae record similar extended Long Counts for the 4 Ajaw 8 Kum'k'u "creation" date. These are: Stela 5, also in the Grupo Macanxoc; Stela 28 near the Grupo Pinturas; and possibly Stela 19 of the Grupo Nohoch Mul.

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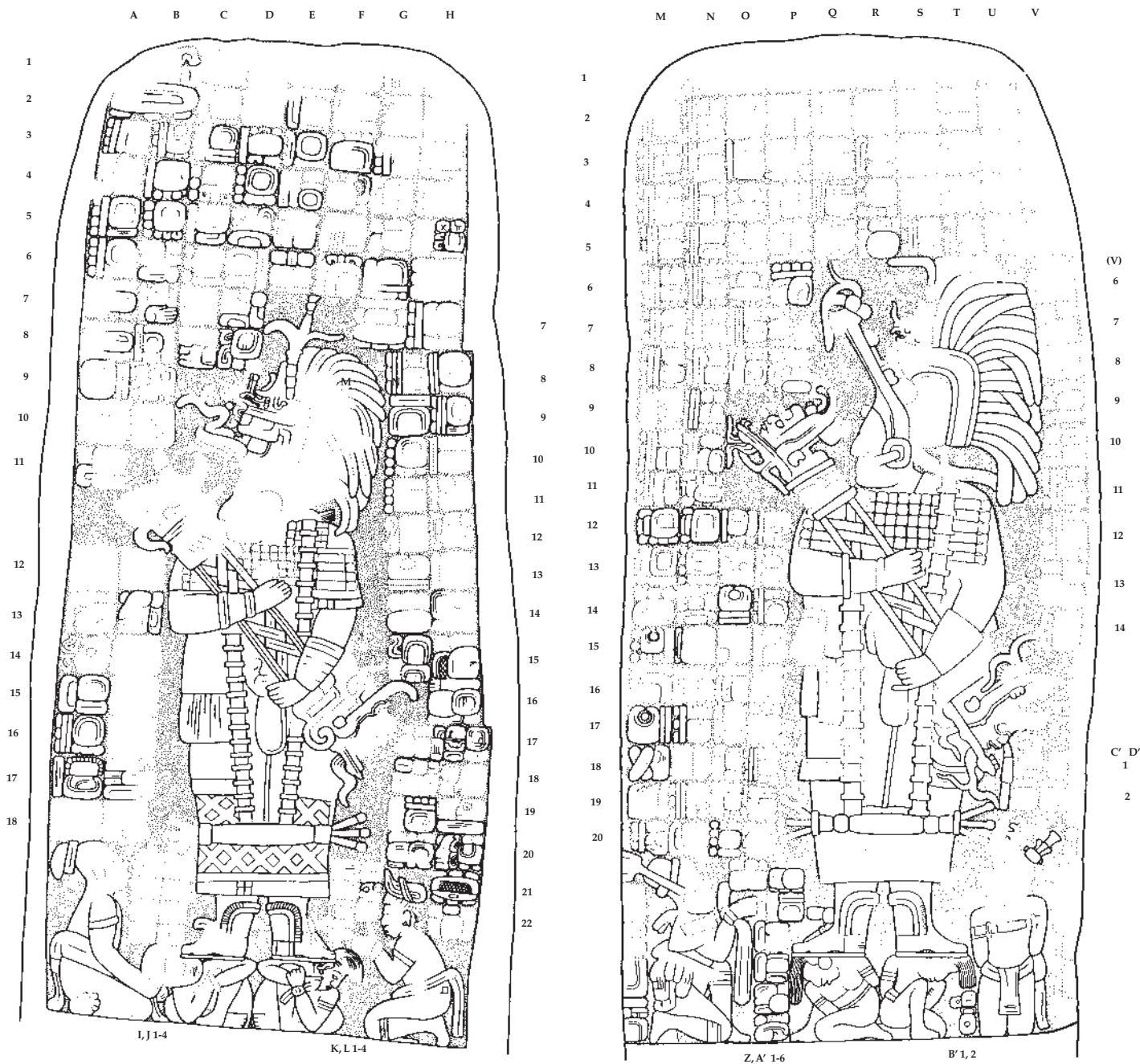


Figure 3. Coba Stela 1: (left) front; (right) back. Drawings by Ian Graham (from Graham and von Euw 1997:18, 22).

The remaining blocks of this accession passage name a second historical individual, just perhaps an early founder of the Coba dynasty. Blocks G19-H19 look like they hold the components of a “numbered successor” reference—**U-9-TZ’AK / bu-li**—before another name beginning with *kaloomte’* (G20), and including as a prominent element K’awil (in H20). The phrase could refer to the newly installed king as *u bolon tz’ak-(v)b-il*, the “ninth ordered,” after some other significant dynast who was the founder of a ruling line sometime probably

in the Early Classic period.

As Thompson long ago noted, this same 9.12.10.5.12 Long Count date is also featured in the texts of Naranjo, Guatemala, located far to the south of Coba. There it is a date of great historical significance, not as an explicit accession of a ruler, but as the “arrival” at Naranjo of the important “Lady Six Sky” from Dos Pilas. This was a pivotal event in Naranjo’s history and was instrumental in reestablishing Naranjo as a major political force within the complex alliance network forged by rulers of

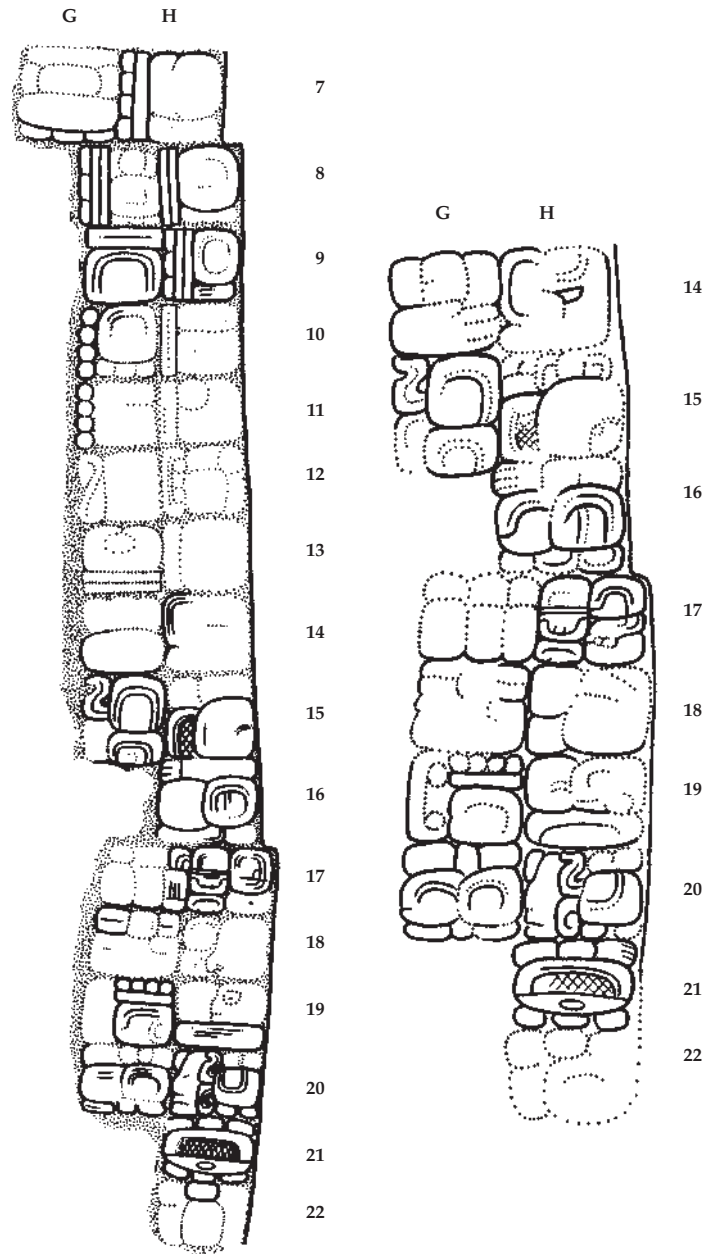


Figure 4. Accession phrase from the front of Coba Stela 1: (left) drawing by Ian Graham, from Graham and Von Euw 1997:18); (right) drawing by David Stuart.

Calakmul (Martin and Grube 2008). Lady Six Sky served as a ruler of Naranjo in her own right, it seems as regent for her young son K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Yopaat (a.k.a., "Smoke Squirrel" in some earlier writings). The co-occurrence of two major dynastic events on the same day in separate kingdoms is probably not coincidence; it may point to some important historical connection between Coba and the "Snake kingdom" to the south, based for many years in the region of Dzibanche, then at Calakmul (see Martin 2005; also Martin and Grube 2008). This hint of an important association between Coba and the political history of cities

to the south bears further investigation.²

The record of two kings in the lengthy inscriptions of Stela 1 mirrors the visual presentation of two portraits on its front and back. I suspect that the front, with its record of the later king's accession, bears that ruler's portrait, whereas the back may represent the earlier protagonist, who celebrated the 9.12.0.0 k'atun ending recorded in the adjacent text columns O and P.

A Later Ruler on Stela 20

A later ruler of Coba appears on Stela 20, a large monument erected in the Grupo Nohoch Mul (Figure 5). Gronemeyer (2004) refers to him as "Ruler C," although as he acknowledges there is clearly a significant gap since the previous known ruler in Coba's history. The lower two fragments of Stela 20 were first documented in 1930 by the sixth Carnegie expedition (Thompson et al. 1932:164). In 1975 the upper portion at last came to light, bearing the Long Count date 9.17.10.0.0 12 Ajaw 8 Pax, significantly later than Stela 1 and other monuments of the Grupo Macanxoc.

In addition to its Long Count dedication, Stela 20 bears a second date, implied by a DN recorded in a short column of glyphs next to the king's left elbow. No CR appears, but it is surely a back reference meant to be counted back in time from the opening Long Count. Thankfully the DN is well preserved, readable as 7.17.15:

$$\begin{array}{r}
 9.17.10.0.0 \text{ 12 Ajaw 8 Pax} \\
 \underline{- 7.17.15} \\
 9.17.2.0.5 \text{ 10 Chikchan 13 Kumk'u}
 \end{array}$$

The verb phrase after the DN, at H7 and H8, is *chumljajiy ti ajaw(il)*, "since he sat in rulership." This is the last accession date known at Coba. Unlike other accession records, Stela 20 does not make use of the "headband fastening" expression seen on Stelae 1 and 4, but instead the common "seating" verb. The name is not given immediately afterward, but it was surely understood to be the same individual recorded as the celebrant of the Period Ending, named at E1-F2 or thereabouts. His name is far too eroded to read, but it again begins with the title *kaloomte'* at E1 (Gronemeyer 2004).

Conclusion

We thus have at least three rulers commemorated in

² It may be significant that the remains of an important hieroglyphic stairway at Coba, still unexcavated, bears a striking resemblance to an inscribed stairway from the ruins of El Resbalon, Quintana Roo, (near to Dzibanche) that cites a number of historical figures associated with the Kan kingdom.

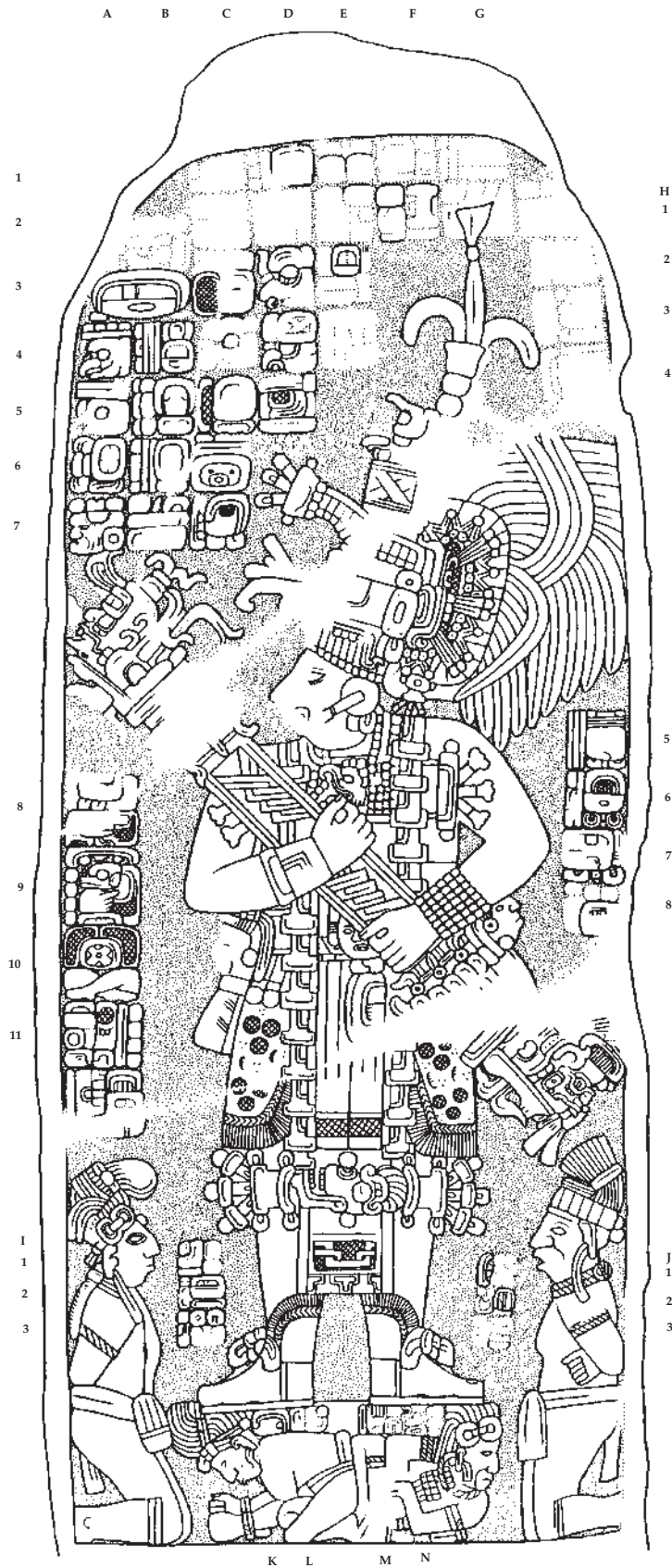


Figure 5. Coba Stela 20. Drawing by Ian Graham (from Graham and von Euw 1997:60).

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the monuments of the Grupo Macanxoc, two of them with solid accession dates, and a fourth king recorded on Stela 20 of the Grupo Nohoch Mul. The partial sequence of Coba rulers is given below, modifying Gronemeyer's original list:

| | | | |
|----------|--------------|----------|--------------------|
| Ruler A: | 9.9.10.0.0 | Stela 6 | Period ending |
| Ruler B: | 9.10.7.5.9 | Stela 4 | Accession |
| | 9.11.0.5.9 | Stela 1 | 13 Tun anniversary |
| | 9.12.0.0.0 | Stela 1 | Period ending |
| Ruler C: | 9.12.10.5.12 | Stela 1 | Accession |
| Ruler D: | 9.17.2.0.5 | Stela 20 | Accession |
| | 9.17.10.0.0 | Stela 20 | Period ending |

The rulers named here as A, B, and C are probably all sequential, but Ruler D remains a chronological outlier, probably preceded in history by two or three intervening kings who remain invisible in Coba's historical record. Also, it should go without saying that other kings precede "Ruler A"—at least one is named on an important inscribed ballcourt panel unearthed several years ago, a study of which is now in preparation. The A-D labels should be considered very provisional, and they will no doubt be modified as the history and the chronology of Coba become clarified in the future.

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