

The Deep Past in Maya History

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- Reading Version -

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(**TITLE SLIDE**) In this paper I would like to give a sketch of the ways that the rhetoric and presentation of Classic Maya history juxtaposed the past with the narrative present. Similar subjects have been studied by several scholars at various times, and it was perhaps first described in a comparative way by George Kubler in 1974, in his paper “Mythological Ancestries in Classic Maya Inscriptions.” There is of course a great deal more to say on the subject, and here I only would like to add a few words based on my own recent researches on the inscriptions of various sites, including Palenque and Copan. It is here and at a few other sites that we see a careful and sometimes subtle structuring of narrative texts and iconographic representations working together as “visual poetics” to highlight important relationships between the actions of living rulers and those of certain archetypes and predecessors. In my view, such a concern forms the backbone of a great many Classic Maya artworks and monuments.

(**SLIDE 2**) Although the boundaries between “myth” and “history” are sometimes difficult to perceive in ancient Mesoamerica, we can discern two broad categories of the deep past in ancient Maya sources. One involves extremely distant eras reaching many thousands of years, if

not far earlier, back to the foundations of cosmology and the ritual actions of deities – what might be simply called “Mythic time.” Another category operates within a more proximate historical timeframe, citing the actions of early rulers and dynastic founders who mostly lived near the so-called “Proto-Classic” and Early Classic. As an aside, I think it important to mention that histories of the Classic period never once trace a single dynastic line back to the Late Preclassic, an era viewed by many Mayanists to be when institution of “Classic” divine kingship and dynastic rule began. (**SLIDE 3**) Rather we see that these *Classic* dynasties are just that, having said to originate no earlier than the first or second centuries A.D. This is the era I prefer to call the “Foundational time” of Maya history, rooted in history and generational experience but fundamentally different from the mythical narrative we see operating on a far grander time-scale.

Both the senses of the deep past served as templates, reflections and exemplars for Late Classic royal ritual and ceremony, giving contemporaneous history much of its structure and meaning. Indeed, one overarching point to be made here is that the power of ritual action – the pervasive theme of Classic Maya monuments – derived in large part from precedent, the idea that royal ceremony was a continuance and reflection of what had happened in the past.

Visually this idea of precedent and continuity can come across very directly through the complex identities of ritual actors – the rulers themselves who overtly embody and replicate personages of the past. (**SLIDE 4**) We see this compellingly shown on the tablet from Temple XXI at Palenque and its posthumous portrait of K'inich Janab Pakal. He is the central figure the

curious scene, presenting an instrument of bloodletting to one of his two grandsons. (the ritual occasion is perhaps the designation of the brothers as royal heir, involving their self-sacrifice).

(**SLIDE 5**) Pakal is named in the accompanying caption, but he is also explicitly marked by name as two important figures of Palenque's past – (**SLIDE 6**) the figure I call the “Ch'a Ruler” who ruled in 967 B.C. – over 15 centuries before Pakal’s reign, as well as an individual named “Snake Spine” who ruled in 251 B.C. – a somewhat more historical timeframe perhaps, corresponding to the Late Preclassic. Both of these distant figures are identified as distant rulers of Palenque’s court, and here their identities merge with that of Pakal. The grandfather thus becomes the embodiment of all ancestors, seemingly to channel their actions and ritual patronage.

The merging of personal identities over great distances of time also involves living rulers (**SLIDE 7**). Tikal’s Stela 16 offers a compelling case of such role-playing, showing the ruler Jasaw Chan K’awiil at his celebration of the Katun ending 9.14.0.0.0. He performs a “stone raising” ceremony at a particular sacred mountain (Twin Pyramid Group N). His portrait shows him dressed in a costume that evokes the hieroglyphic name of a distant ancestor named in the inscriptions of Tikal and Dos Pilas, both members of the Mutul court. This mythical ruler figure remains obscure in some ways, but on one Dos Pilas panel he is named as the king who oversees and the baktun ending at 13.0.0.0.0, in 3114 B.C. The Tikal stela is thus quite visually explicit in showing Jasaw Chan K’awiil as the reincarnation of a mythic actor, repeating the proto-typical acts of stone-raising and creating time.

These examples from Palenque and Tikal are perhaps not new to many listeners, and the idea of royal embodiment has now been known for some time, after I and Steve Houston first identified the pattern in the hieroglyphic texts a couple of decades ago. However, I believe it is far more common than many have realized. Similar themes are implicit in nearly all formal representations on Maya rulers as ritual performers on stelae and other major monuments.

(**SLIDE 8**) The designers of such monuments usually are explicit in marking the temporal placement of the event, but in visual terms they are meant to be far more ambiguous. The rituals themselves – raising stones, scattering incense, and so on – exist on a more timeless frame of reference where action is cosmic in its repercussions. As we will see, hieroglyphic texts are often clear in describing the rituals of kings as continuations and re-occurrences of deeper patterns and events. Even when such overt textual statements do not occur, though, the imagery of kingly ceremony conveys the same idea through costume and spatial identification.

The continuity of action from deep-time need not always involve a complete merging of identities with actors of the past. Rhetorically it is perhaps more common to see living rulers juxtaposed with ancestors, each performing a kind of reflection of one another's actions.

(**SLIDE 9**) We see this perhaps most explicitly conveyed in the monuments of Copan and Quirigua, where ritual action routinely was anchored to the deep, mythical past actions of gods and distant ancestors. Stela C, the central monument of Copan's great plaza, presents two portraits, each accompanied by a vertical text on the stela's sides. The image on the east face and the text on the south side corresponds to the contemporaneous ruler Waxaklajuun Ubaah K'awiil who celebrated the k'atun ending of 9.14.0.0.0 6 Ahau 13 Kayab, a date recorded

at the end of the text on the south side. The opposite figure and text refers to a very distant ancestor named K'an Ch'ajan(?) Itzam K'an Ahk who "raised the stone" many thousands of years in the past on another 6 Ahau date. His portrait on the western face with a long beard recalls a distinctive feature of the hieroglyph for *mam*, "grandfather" or "ancestor." Two other distant stone-raisings are cited in the inscription, occurring in mythic time between this initial event and the historical present.

(**SLIDE 10**) Quirigua's monuments famously present the same idea, surely deriving its sense of design from Copan precedents. On Stela E, for example, the celebration of the Period Ending 9.17.0.0.0 by the ruler K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Yopaat is presented as a contemporary reflection of two very distant Period Endings many thousands of years in the past. All of the remote episodes occur on the day 13 Ahau, the same as the contemporary event, which is very much the point of the inscription and the deep history it describes. In these two-faced monuments, two symmetrical portraits display the complementary actors of deep-time and real-time. And significantly they occupy the same "body" of stone, giving it two identities. The intent seems to establish the ritual actions of the living Copan and Quirigua rulers in direct relation to the stone raising of the more ancient figure. Identities are not fused, but the actions and the mode of commemoration certainly are.

The bilateral symmetry we see so pervasive in these monuments from Copan and Quirigua reflects a very old and archaic format where different episodes in time are presented both textually and visually as "co-occurrences." Surely such formats are conceptually related to the

common bilateral representations of temporal action in Preclassic and Early Classic iconography

(**SLIDE 11**). Stela 5 from Takalik Abaj shows a similar idea of mirrored history, relating or equating two events that occur on two dates, inscribed as Long Counts on the central column.

Similarly, the Motmot marker from Copan (**SLIDE 12**) shows two rulers, K'inich Yak K'uk' Mo' and his son Yopaat K'inich, engaged with a central text column. They are shown co-actors and co-participants, but probably not actually co-existing in a single moment. In fact, we are probably to understand that there is an inherent temporal flow to such juxtapositions, moving from left to right, from an earlier timeframe to a later one.

Throughout the rhetoric of Maya history this visual and textual dialogue between the “then” and the “now” is all-important, but it can operate in different ways and sometimes at different time-scales. (**SLIDE 13**) The Late Classic sculptures of Yaxchilan, for example, employ their own elegant expressions of historical resonance, spanning eras between living rulers and their dynastic predecessors. Here the connections are always conveyed by the texts, never in juxtapositions of scenes or portraits. Here in Structure 44 the sculpture programs around the temple doorways commemorate key conquests in the reign of Shield Jaguar, always linking these conquests to those of earlier Yaxchilan kings. Clearly these are meant to show long-term continuities in the performance of military duty and office, with Shield Jaguar sustaining an ancestral role. One gets the sense from Structure 44's rhetoric that war, like Period ending ritual, was a perpetual idea -- an aspect of rulership that was always to be renewed and sustained over centuries.

One particular glyphic phrase seems to encapsulate this phenomenon of then-and-now historiography (**SLIDE 14**) -- *u tzakbij*, “he continues it (i.e., a past event).” Its important role in ancient Maya poetics is well illustrated by Lintels 45 and 46 of Yaxchilan, each of which commemorates the capture of an important prisoner during the reign of Shield Jaguar II. On Lintel 46, the phrase is tacked on to the record of the capture of Aj K'an Usij in 661 A.D.:

u tzakbij u took' u pakal ? bahlam k'uhul pa'chan ajaw

“He continues the war of ‘Knot-eye’ Jaguar, the Holy Pa’chan Lord.”

Which is to say that the taking of Aj K'an Usij prisoner is a continuance, a resonance, of an earlier conflict. The text of the carved step placed in the same building as Lintel 46 cites a war of Knot-eye Jaguar against a ruler of the Lacanha region (near Bonampak) in 512 A.D. The prisoner Aj K'an Usij may be from the same general region. Whatever the historical details, the scribe has juxtaposed an old war with a current one, emphasizing the living king's ability to not only perform his duties as warrior, but to perform that duty within the context of a protracted conflict with a long-term enemy. Royal duty is thus a “continuation” of what others have done in the distant past.

A larger phrase that builds upon this idea in a very direct way is *u tzakbij u kabij*, which I translate as “he (the ruler) continues or follows the work of...” (**SLIDE 15**). This occurs in inscriptions whose histories have long timespans, and especially in formats where we find long lists of repeating events. The sarcophagus of Pakal offers a good example (**SLIDE 16**). Near the

end of that text, with its list of royal deaths, the phrase “he follows the works of the grandfathers” announces Pakal’s new place as a member of a distinguished line of ancestors. Their “work” perhaps involves their regenerative nature and connection to precious foodstuffs, as represented so explicitly in the sides of the sarcophagus itself. Probably the best illustration of the use of this key phrase comes from Stela 31 of Tikal, again a long-term relation of ancestral history and ritual (**SLIDE 17**). The structure of that text, as I have noted elsewhere, emphasizes the oversight (*kabjiiy*) of k’atun endings leading up to the rule of the ruler Siyaj Chan K’awiil. Throughout that inscription the scribe notes how this king’s ritual duties “complete” or “continue the work” of his many predecessors. What comes now is a reflection of what came before.

Among the Aztecs, the juxtaposition of past episodes with contemporaneous events was of course fairly routine. Henry Nicholson, the noted Aztec scholar, made an important observation when he noted that Aztec rites and events were commemorated as “like-in-kind” to similar events from the historical or mythological past. Fundamental to the presentation of Aztec history was the notion that events in history and mythology were mutual reflections of one another, dialoguing across boundaries of time and experience. Nicholson’s description could also apply to the ways in which Classic Maya scribes composed their own formal histories, full of carefully plotted repetitions and parallelisms. As noted, here are precious few ancient Maya historical records that treat contemporary history – royal life events and rituals – as isolated events with significance only in the here-and-now. Instead it was imperative that episodes of recent time be framed and referenced with regard to the past; otherwise they held little

meaning. I prefer to label these representations of co-occurrence, linking events crossing temporal boundaries, as *reflective history*.

(**SLIDE 18**) Perhaps the greatest, most nuanced expression of this principle can be found in the symbols and texts of Palenque's Cross Group, with its explicit pairings and juxtapositions of mythology with the events in the life and times of the new king, K'inich Kan Bahlam. The presentation of the tablets is very explicit in this way, employing bilateral symmetry to relate not only connections between the mythic past and the present, but also over the timeframe of Kan Bahlam's life as a prince and ruler. Each tablet shows two portraits of the king on either side of the central icon, one as a young six year-old boy, the other as a 49 year-old king upon his accession. The accompanying text is carefully parsed to two sections, such that the left-hand side is directly related to mythic time, and the opposite text to historical or dynastic time. The left-hand events relate of course to the births of the Triad deities, and the right hand text to their reappearance and housing in the temples upon their dedication. (**SLIDE 19**) This left-right / myth-history structure repeats itself throughout Palenque's art and inscriptions, as we see also on the Tablet of Temple XIV. It is the visual design of the texts that provides their physical mirroring with one another – not necessarily the content and structure of the texts themselves.

As Houston noted some years ago, lengthy texts often frame events by means of an ever-moving point of temporal reference, or what he called the “shifting now.” Episodes strung together to compose narrative histories are marked the same way in terms of tense and aspect. Individual episodes might be routinely linked to certain background events that use verbs

marked as past, in the completive aspect, but over the course of a long inscription all highlighted episodes seem to exist on the same temporal plane, occurring one after the other in a consistent sense of present time.

This is precisely the structure we find being used in the narratives of the Cross Group tablets and elsewhere. The sense of “now” is highlighted even further by the fact that half of the narrative contents of the main tablets occur in a distant mythical “past,” including the births of four prominent deities who form the subject matter of the tablets – the Triad Progenitor and his offspring, the members of the Palenque Triad. Rhetorically their births are very much in the here-and-now, never really represented in the complex discourse as ancient events. The precise numbers of the dates and time intervals provide the proper chronological framework by which to orient the narratives in time, the events themselves seem “atemporal” when encountered on their own. This is clearly intentional. It becomes a very useful device used by which Maya scribes highlight the linkages and connections that bridged myth and history – a god “is born,” an ancestor “is crowned,” and the living king makes these events his own, overseeing and “following the works” of those predecessors.

Similar “centerings” and juxtapositions are important in many other presentations of history. On La Corona Panel 1 (**SLIDE 20**) we see a lengthy text enveloping a small scene of two standing figures who face one another across the center line. There is a strong two-part aspect to this form of the monument, even in the choice of different stones used and in the carving style, with the glyphs of the left portion carved far more carefully than those of the right. The long

narrative focuses on the dedication of a shrine (*wayib*) for a patron deity of La Corona. The text relates various important background events to this culminating episode, including two arrivals of individuals from distant places, each occurring in deep time. The more immediate background history concerns the ruler K'inich ? Yook and his travel to Calakmul for his investiture as a member of Kaanul extended royal court. (**SLIDE 21**) This is recorded textually in the band of glyphs that runs above the scene of the two figures. And it so happens that the two lords facing one another are the one and the same individual in different moments in time. On the left is K'inich ? Yook, performing a scattering ceremony on 9.12.5.0.0, in 677. On the right he is shown in full Kaanul dance garb, four years earlier in 673. The text describes his investiture, and in an ingenious way the scene emphasizes his two ritual identities, one as a performer of Saknikte' (La Corona) and the other as a dancer at Calakmul. Time and space are conflated once again, even though on a shorter scale.

(**SLIDE 22**) The text on this La Corona panel jumps quite bit in time-frame, opening with a record of the shrine dedication in 677, then immediately turning to a date in 314, The reader is simply given the gist a new episode – a journey by some enigmatic character from afar -- with no distance number or temporal frame of reference. The narrative them jumps forward many centuries to the record of the king's father dedicating his own temple shrine in 638, before describing in some detail the political events surrounding the current ruler and his close ties to Calakmul. Interestingly, the text goes on to mention another journey by a mythical individual if the far, deep past, in 3805 B.C. The narrative roots of the featured shrine dedication therefore exist in what I have described above as both mythic time (3805 B.C.) and in foundational time.

In addition, the text takes the important step to jump forward in time to establish a future event – the upcoming Period Ending of 682. The featured event of this narrative history thus exists betwixt and between the past and the future. This is a rhetorical device we find in many Maya inscriptions, which I refer to as *temporal centering*.

Naranjo, Altar 1 (**SLIDE 23**) presents this same structure in a purely textual way. The opening of the inscription records the accession of a mythical ancestor some 17,000 years in the past. The text jumps forward to commemorate a ritual in 258 B.C., during the Late Preclassic – probably an early historical reference and one of a handful known for that era. We therefore have two events of the deep past to consider at the outset: one in what I have called mythical time and the other in foundational time. (**SLIDE 24**) The core, highlighted event of the altar is truly historical and contemporary, concerning the dedication and later refurbishment of a temple in 596 A.D, accompanied by a mass human sacrifice. (**SLIDE 25**) The text then closes with a long-distance jump forward to the future, citing the baktun ending in 830 A.D. Again the major episode emphasized is framed by the deep past and the deep future, centered both spatially and temporally in the narrative. The visual design echoes the textual structure.

(**CLOSING SLIDE**) In these selected examples – and there are a great many others to consider -- we see how the actions and accomplishments of Classic-era rulers were framed as repetitions and reflections of events that came before, whether in mythological, foundation or historical time. In an obvious way it was the cyclical nature of time and the Long Count is what gave history its narrative symmetry and resonance across spans both large and small. And as we see

elsewhere in Mesoamerica, ceremonies and rituals commemorated on Classic monuments were *by their very nature* repetitions of deeper patterns in time and history, where predecessors, ancestors and gods performed the same like-in-kind events. In art and narrative, the Classic Maya constantly reflected this profound aspect of an ideology wherein ritual, action and time were always operating as parts of a larger symmetrical pattern.

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Mythic time



| 3.0.0.0 4 Ahau 8 Cumku



Foundational time

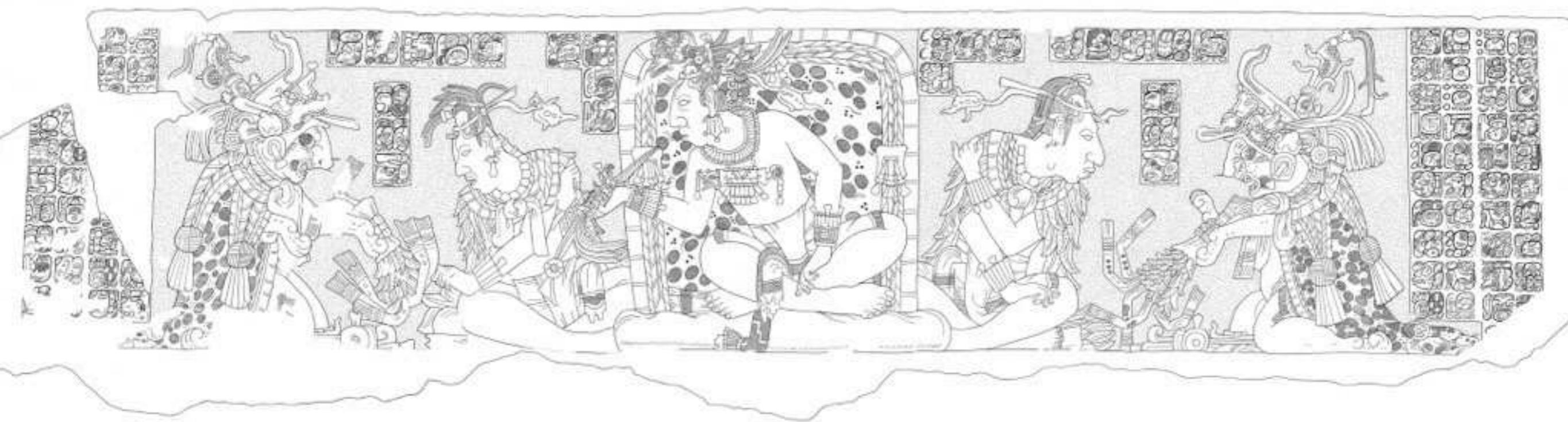
Historical time

Foundational Time



Ehb' Xook, The Founder of the Tikal Dynasty
1st century A.D.

Palenque, Temple XXI bench



The Merging of Temporal Identities

“Ch’á Ruler”
967 BC

“Snake Spine”
251 BC

K’inich Janab Pakal
615-682 AD



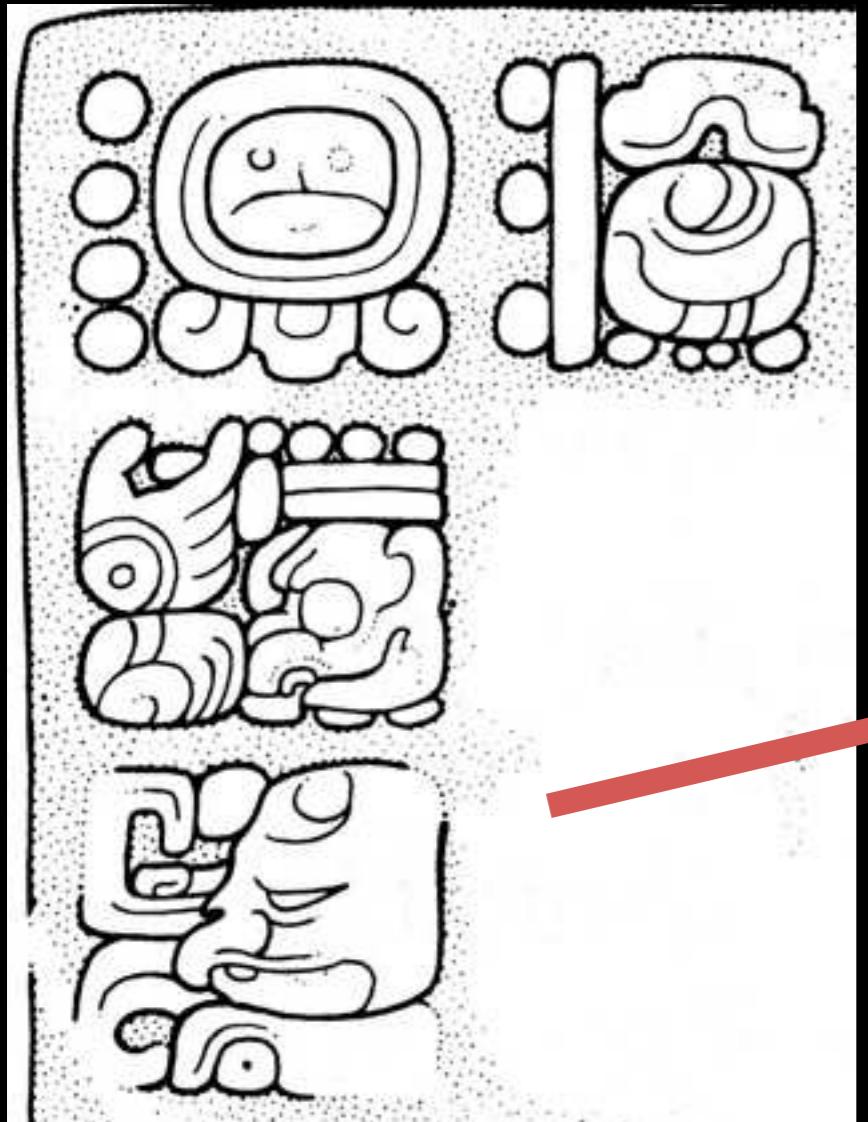
The Merging of Temporal Identities

“Ch’á Ruler”
967 BC

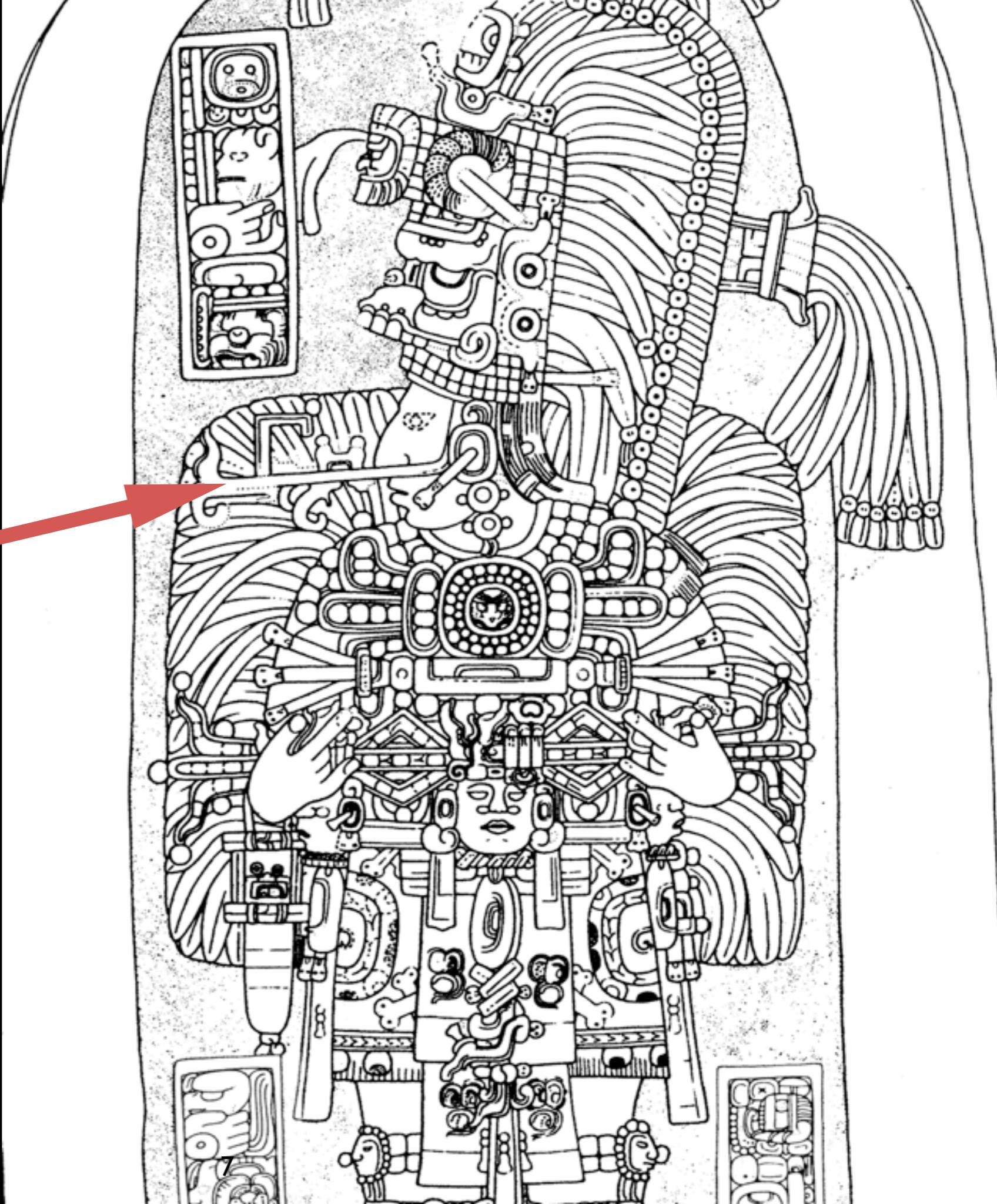
“Snake Spine”
251 BC

K’inch Janab Pakal
615-682 AD





Tikal
Stela 16





Copan, Stela C



Quirigua, Stela E

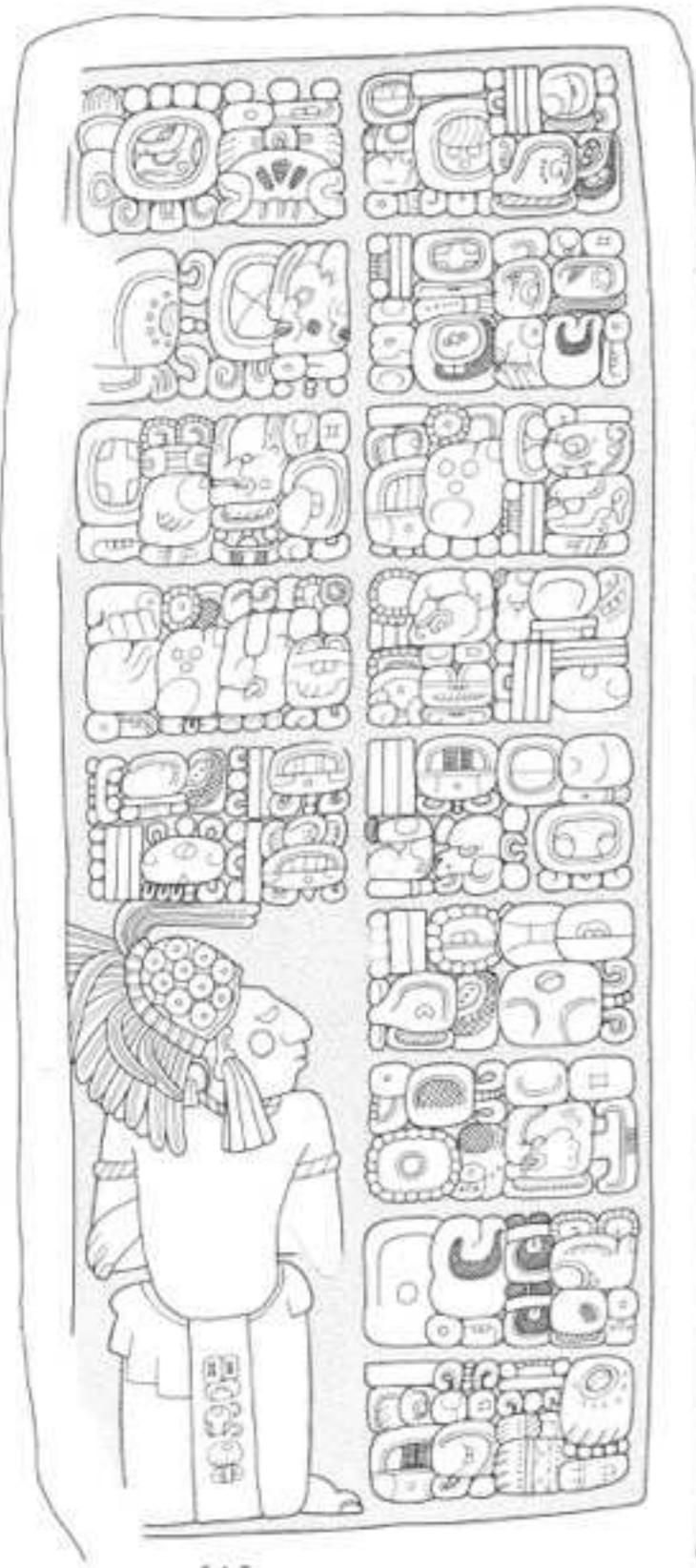




The “Motmot Marker” Copan



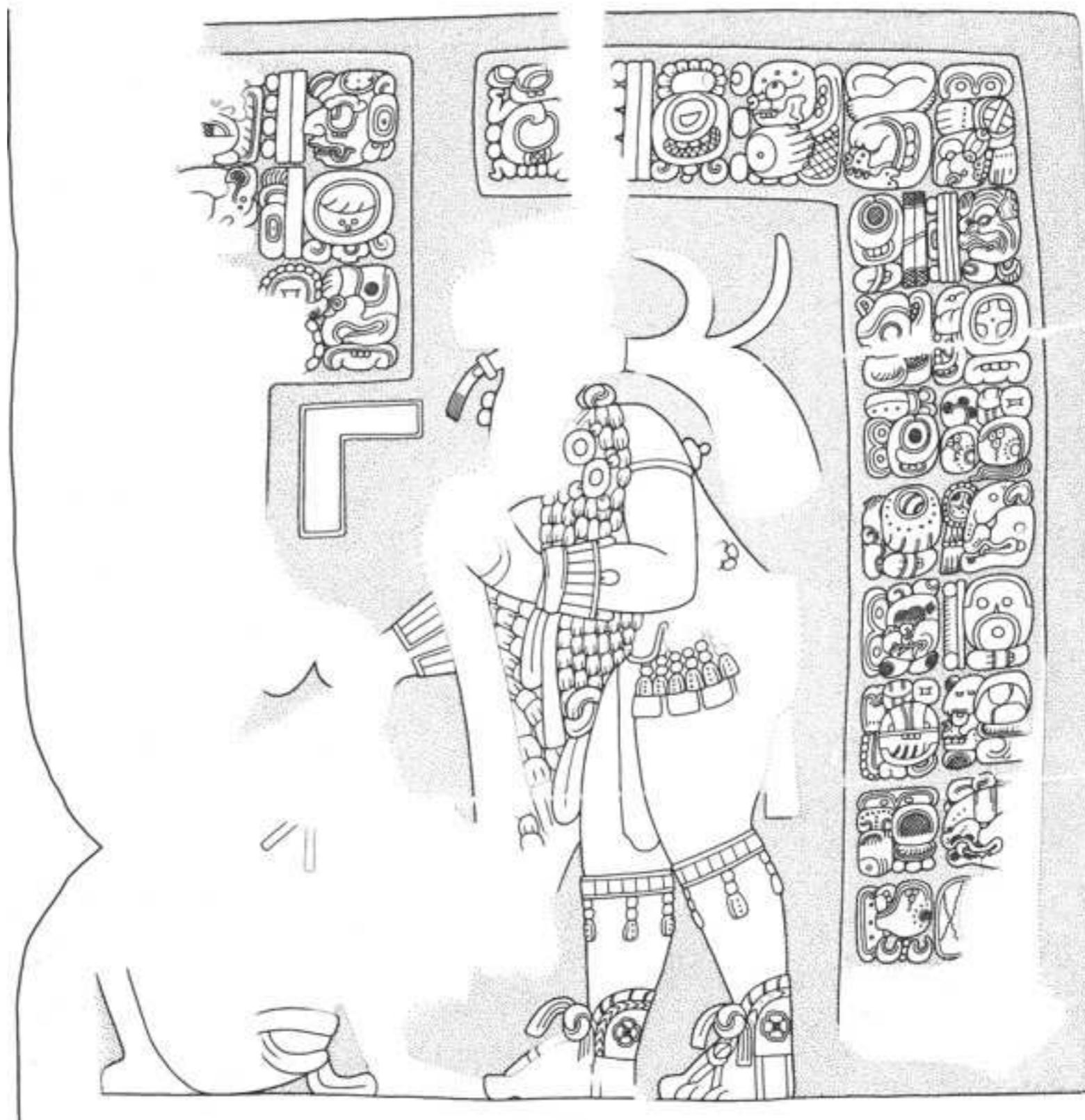
A B C D



E 1-3

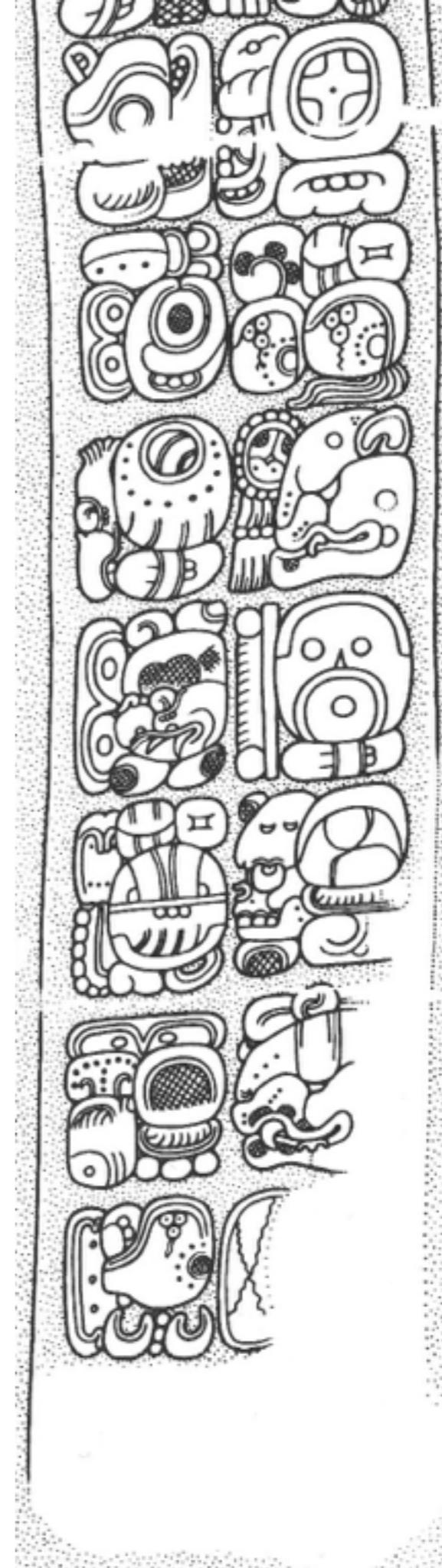
Step I Tread

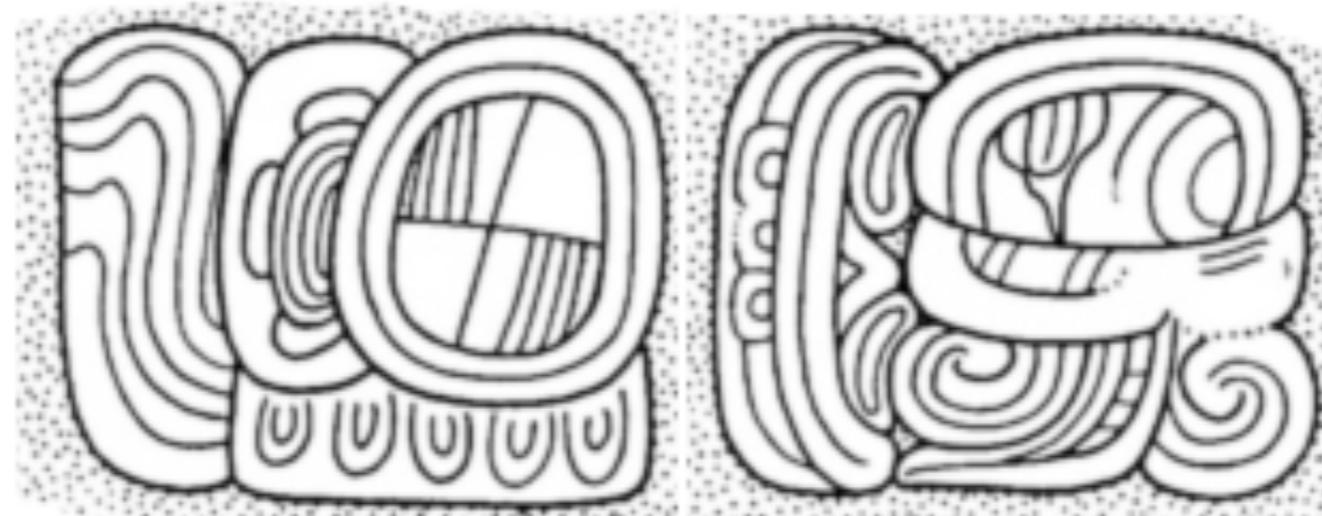
A B C D E F G





u tzakbij u took' u pakal
“he continues(?) the war of...”





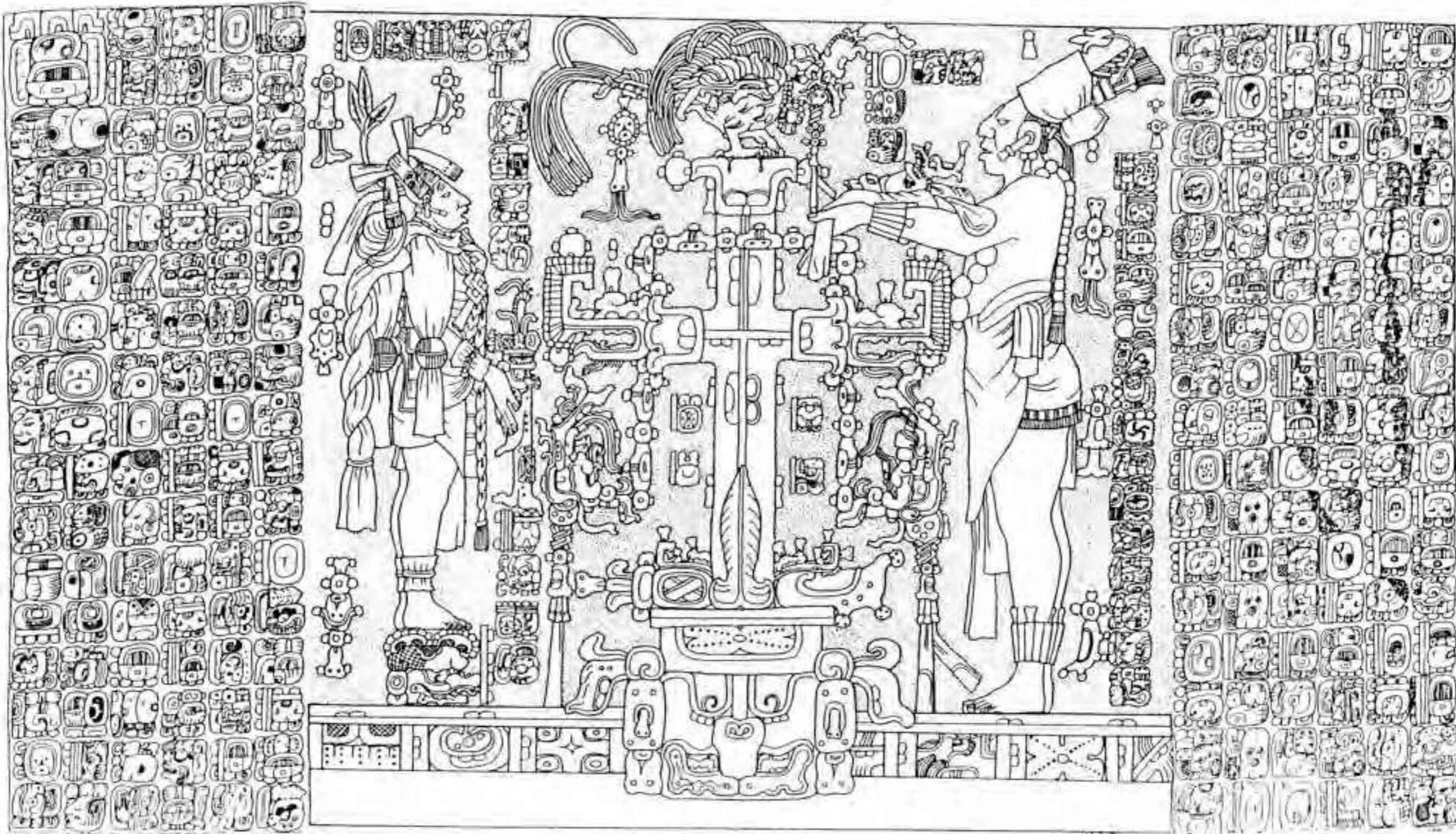
u tz'akbu(j)i y u chab(j)i y
“he continues(?) the work(s) of...”





Mythic Time

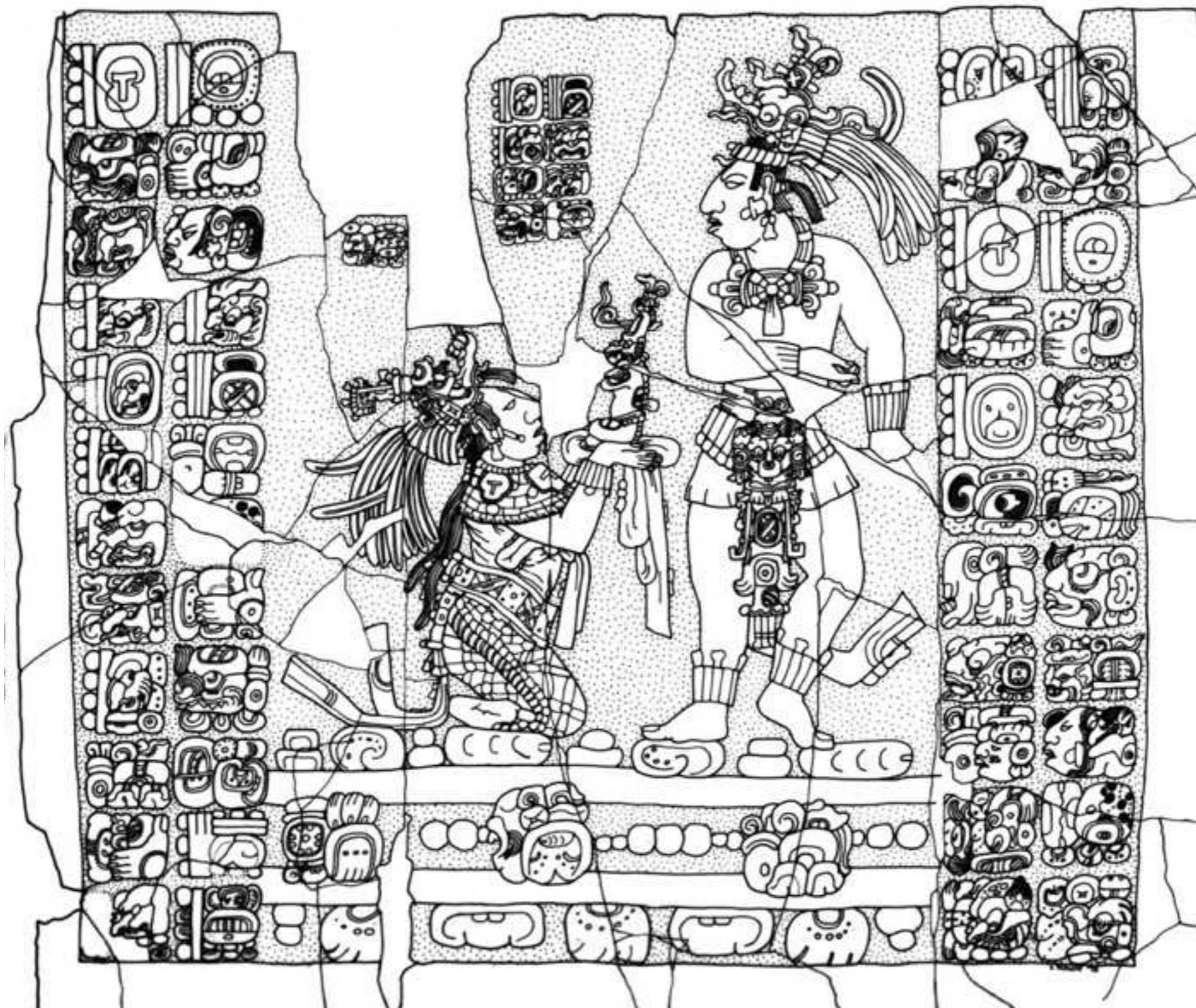
Historical Time



Palenque, Tablet of the Cross

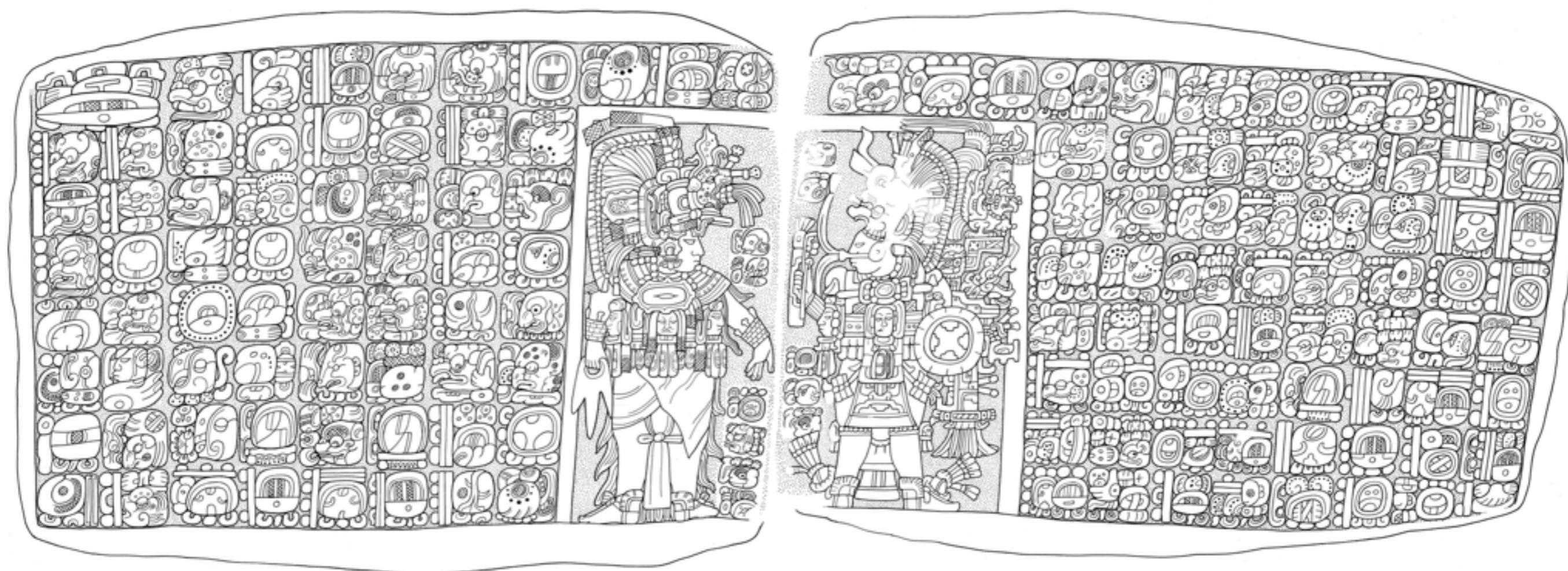
Mythic Time

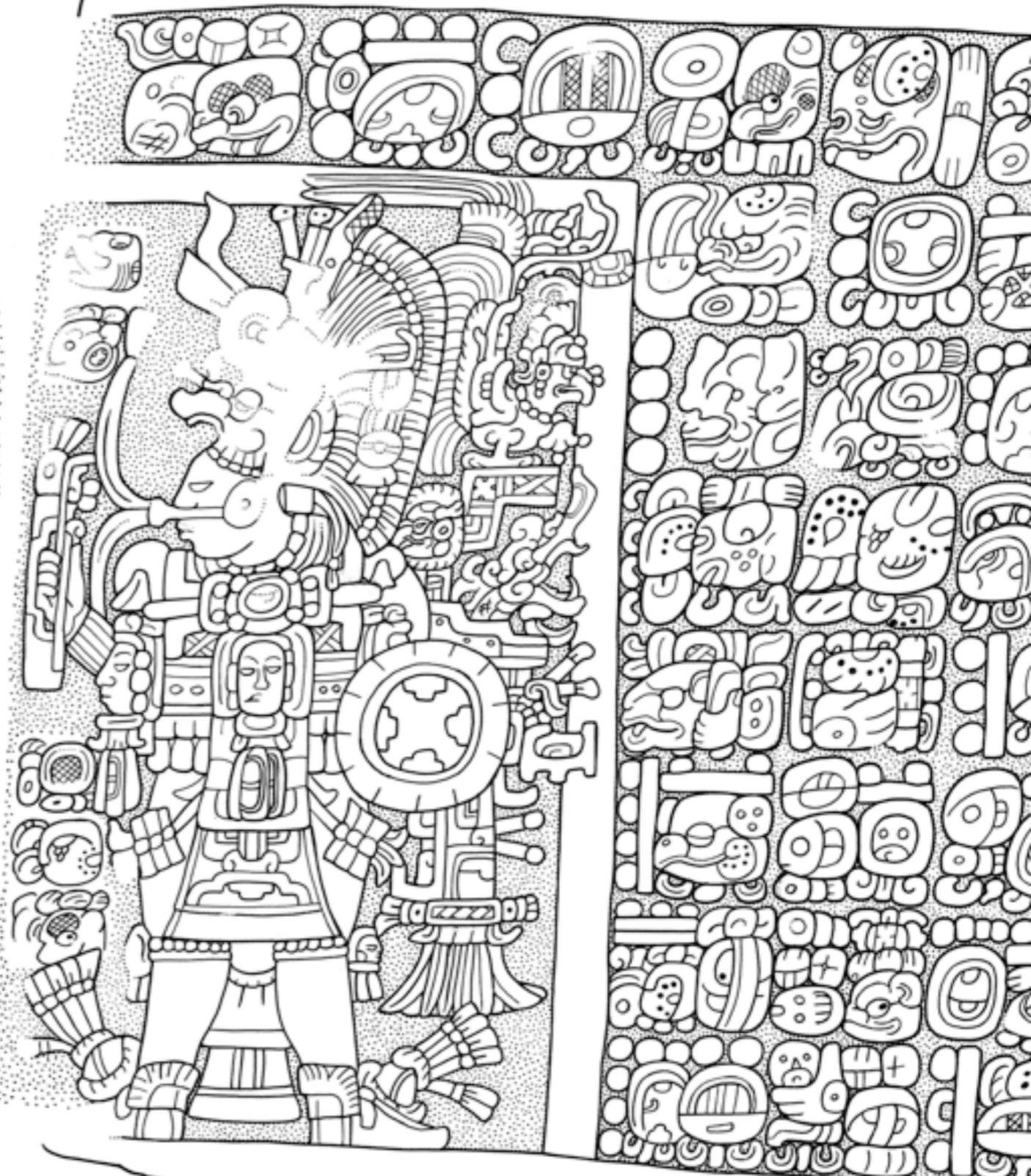
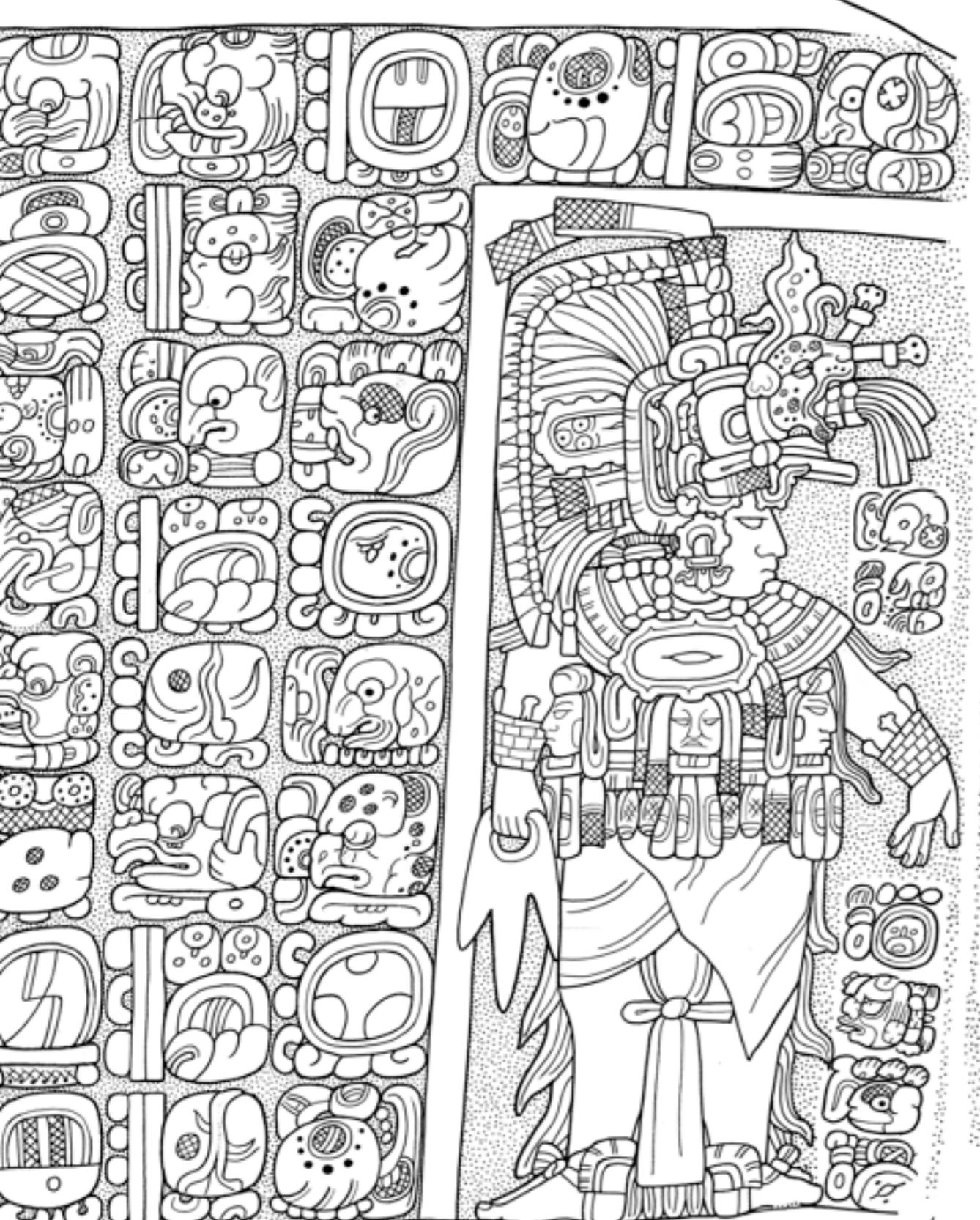
Historical Time

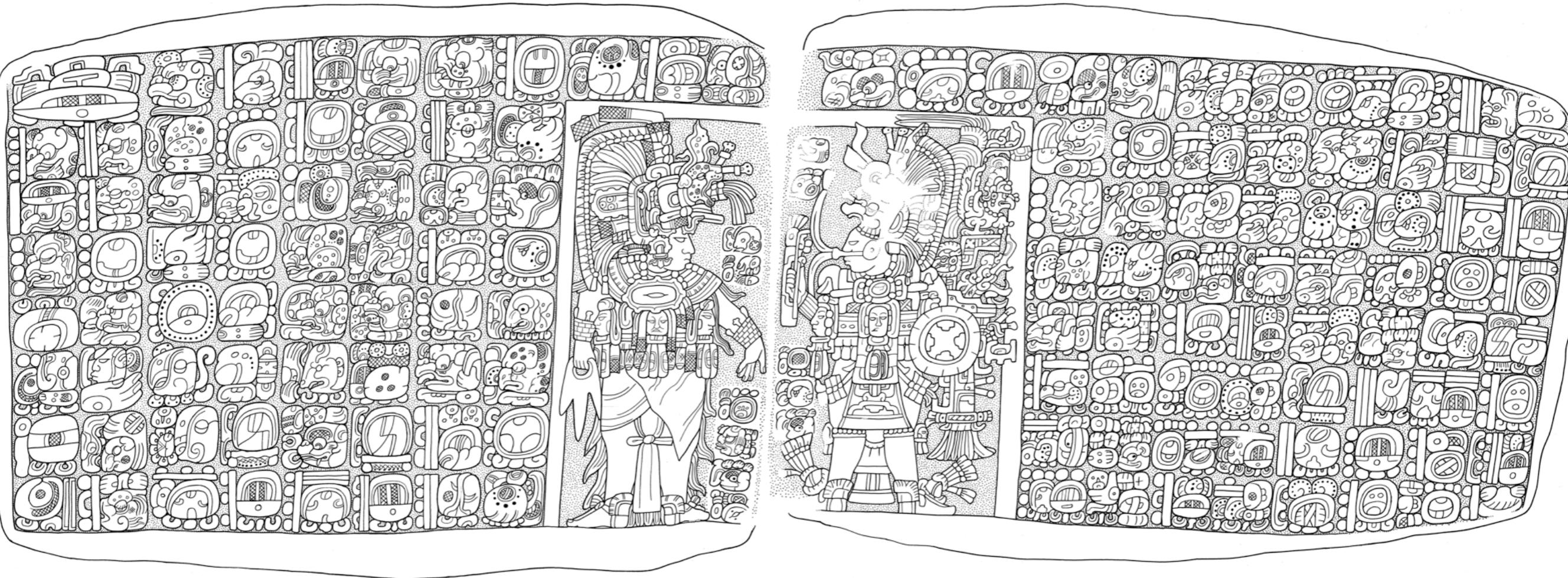


Palenque, Temple XIV Tablet

La Corona, Panel I







9.12.5.7.4 4 Kan 7 Mac
October 22, 677

Featured event

8.13.17.1.4 4 Kan 2 Mol
October 9, 314

Foundational Time

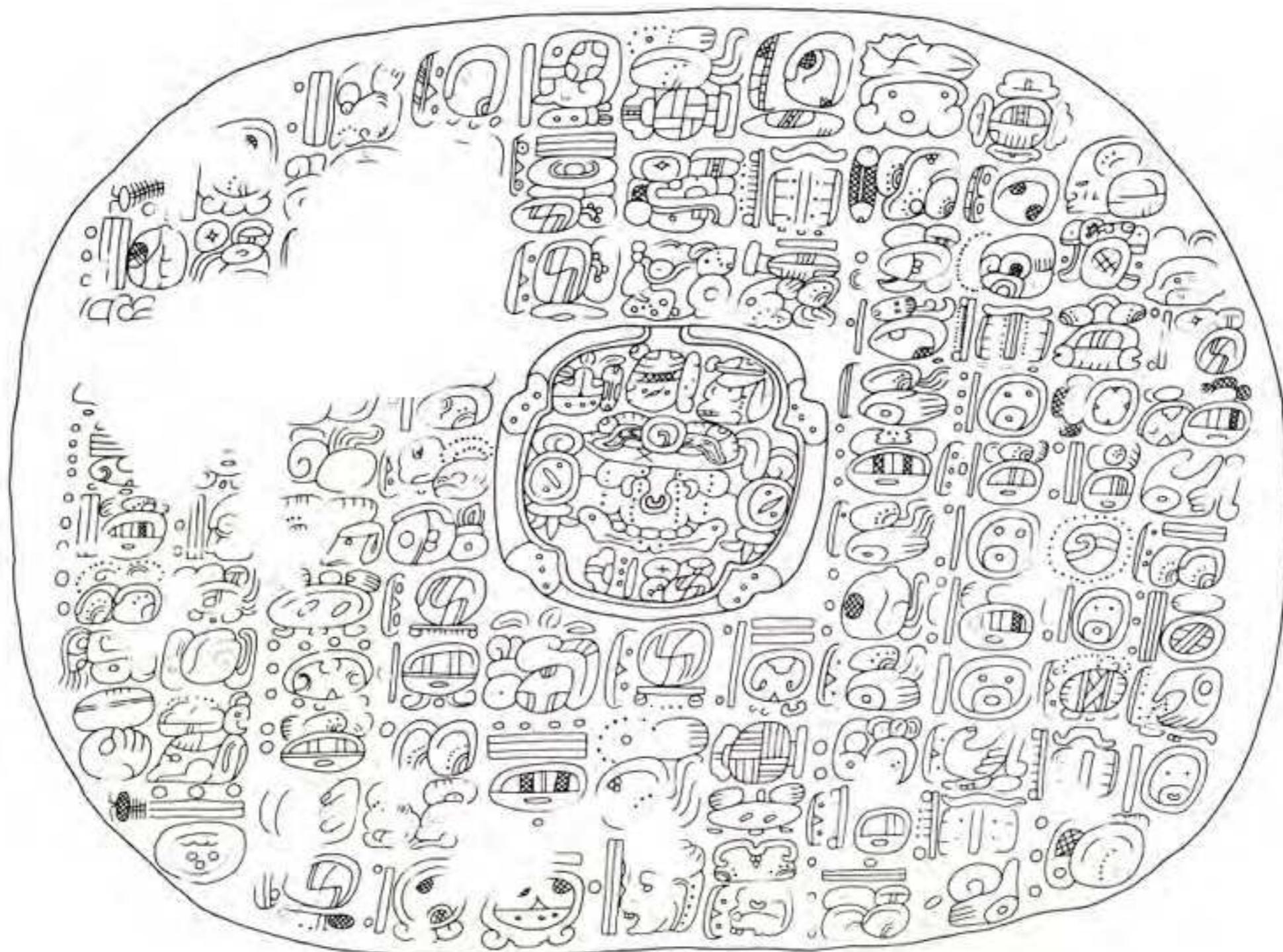
11.4.19.0.4 4 Kan 7 Zac
September 6, 3805 BC

Mythic Time

9.12.10.0.0 9 Ahau 18 Zotz'
May 8, 682

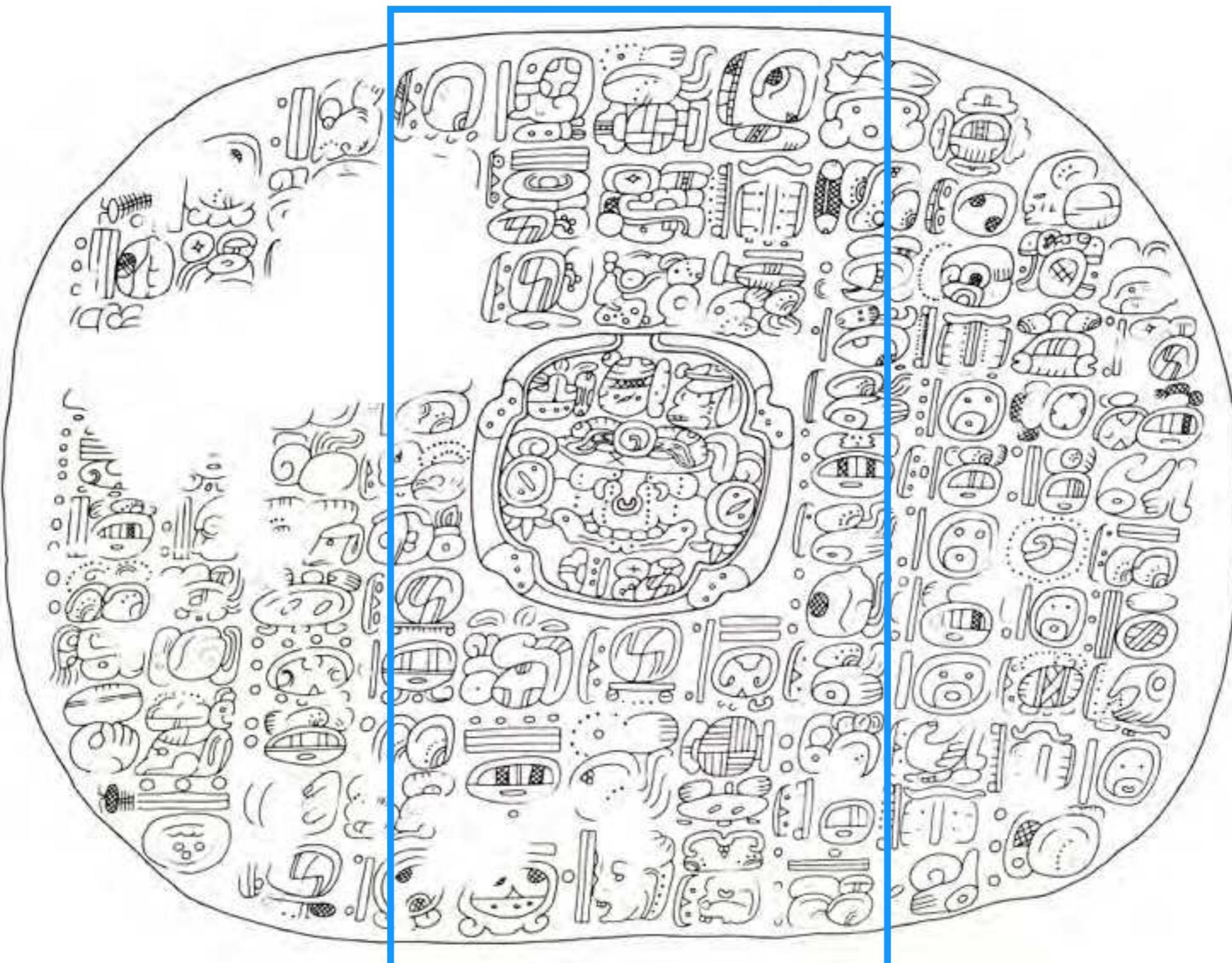
Future

Temporal Centering



Naranjo, Altar 1

Temporal Centering



13.10.13.11.15. 1.10 *5 Ok 18 K'ank'in

2.13.13.*1.17. 4

7. 4.17. 0.14

13 Ix 12 Xul

deep past

2. 2. 6. 3. 3

9. 7. 3. 3.17

7 Kaban 5 K'ayab

19.10. 7

9. 8. 2.14. 3

7 Ak'bal 11 Sotz'

historical time

9. 6. 0. 0. 0

9 Ahaw 3 Wayeb

9. 7. 0. 0. 0

7 Ahaw 3 K'ank'in

9. 8. 0. 0. 0

5 Ahaw 3 Ch'en

12. 0. 0. 0

10. 0. 0. 0. 0

7 Ahaw 18 Zip

deep future

