

THE TERMINAL CLASSIC PERIOD AT CEIBAL AND IN THE MAYA LOWLANDS

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Ceibal is well known for the pioneering investigations conducted by Harvard University in the 1960s (Sabloff 1975; Smith 1982; Tourtellot 1988; Willey 1990). Since then, Ceibal has been considered to be a key site in the study of the Classic Maya collapse (Sabloff 1973a, 1973b; Sabloff and Willey 1967). The results of this project led scholars to hypothesize the following: 1) Ceibal survived substantially longer than other centers through the period of the Maya collapse; and 2) the new styles of monuments and new types of ceramics resulted from foreign invasions, which contributed to the Maya collapse.

In 2005 we decided to revisit this important site to re-examine these questions in the light of recent developments in Maya archaeology and epigraphy. The results of the new research help us to shape a more refined understanding of the political process during the Terminal Classic period. The important points that we would like to emphasize in this paper are: 1) Ceibal did not simply survive through this turbulent period, but it also experienced political disruptions like many other centers; 2) this period of political disruptions was followed by a revival of Ceibal; and 3) our data support the more recent view that there were no foreign invasions; instead the residents of Ceibal were reorganizing and expanding their inter-regional networks of interaction.

Ceibal is located on the Pasión River, and a comparison with the nearby Petexbatun centers, including Dos Pilas and Aguateca, is suggestive. Some years after AD 761, Dos Pilas was abandoned by the elite, and its dynasty stayed in the more defensible twin center of Aguateca (Demarest 1997). The last ruler of Aguateca, as well as the small remaining population at Dos Pilas and other communities, hastily constructed defensive walls, which indicates that warfare in the region intensified significantly

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(Demarest et al. 1997; Inomata 2007). About the same time, Ceibal also experienced a political disruption. As noted by Houston and Mathews (1985; see also Houston 1993), there was a break in dynastic succession, and Ceibal was governed by an individual named Ajaw Bot, who apparently did not carry the Ceibal Emblem Glyph. Harvard researchers suggested that during the Late Classic period Ceibal's rulers and most elites lived in Group D, probably because of its defensible location. Despite the extensive defensive wall system, Aguateca did not last much longer. Our research has demonstrated that Aguateca was attacked and destroyed around AD 810 (Inomata 1997, 2003; Inomata et al. 2004).

It is likely that about the same time Ceibal also suffered a political collapse. The enigmatic ruler, Ajaw Bot, is shown in Stelae 5 and 7, the latter of which records the date of AD 800 (Graham 1990). We re-examined Stela 5 closely and confirmed that it was not complete. Its lower left glyph blocks show square outlines but glyphic details were never carved (Figure 1). Monuments may be left unfinished for various reasons, but some of them, including Aguateca Altar M (Inomata et al. 2004) and Copan Altar L (Fash 2001) were not completed, most likely because of political disintegration. Ceibal Stela 5 probably belongs to this set of unfinished monuments. After AD 800 Ceibal fell into a nearly half century hiatus in monument erection.

In this regard, Ceibal probably experienced political upheavals toward the end of the eighth century like many other centers in the Maya lowlands. However, what distinguishes Ceibal from many other centers is that Ceibal did have a dynastic revival. As discussed by Schele and Mathews (1998), Stela 11 states that a ruler whose name may be Wat'ul K'atel arrived at Ceibal in 829 under the auspices of a person from Ucanal, and he carried the Ceibal Emblem Glyph. It appears that Wat'ul K'atel was claiming to be a legitimate heir to the Ceibal throne. After twenty years he held a large ceremony celebrating a K'atun ending. In relation to this ceremony held on 10.1.0.0, he erected five stelae. Contrary to the early views, subsequent studies by various scholars show that there is nothing in these monuments that

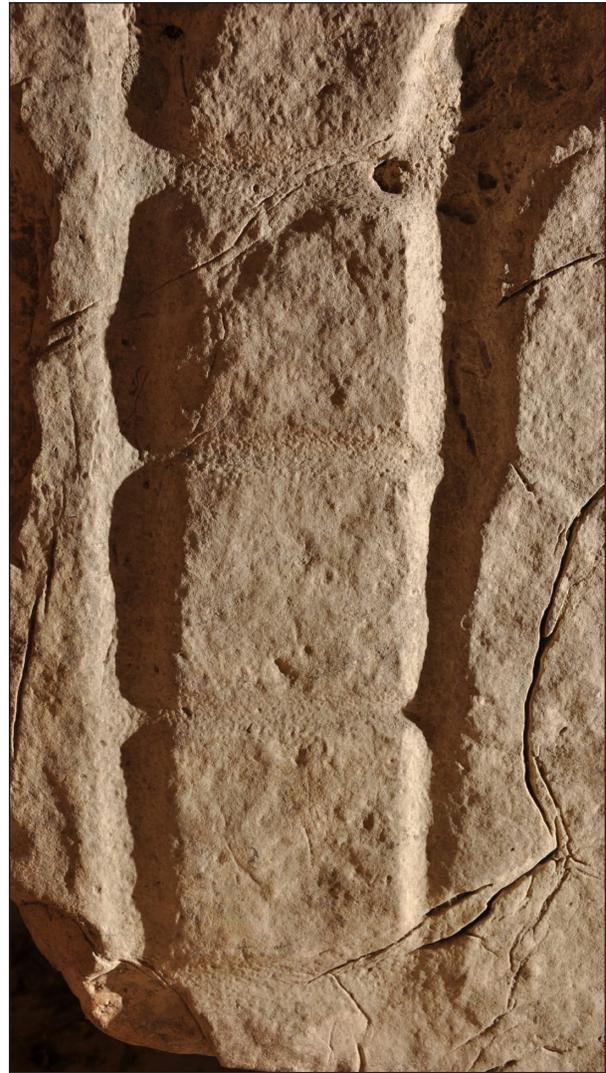


Figure 1. Lower left glyph blocks of Stela 5. Their outlines are visible, but the glyphs were never carved (Ceibal Project).

suggests foreign invasions (Just 2006; Stuart 1993). Instead, what they shows is an effort by this ruler to reestablish a network of alliance with other centers, recording visiting rulers from Tikal, Calakmul, Motul de San José, Lakamtuun, and the enigmatic city called Puh.

Harvard researchers suggested that during this period the Ceibal ruler moved his palace from Group D to Group A (Tourtellot and González 2004). Our excavation of the East Court confirmed this idea. Structure A-16 was probably the residential and administrative building of Wat'ul K'atel. It was an elaborate building made of beautifully cut blocks, and its facade was decorated with intricate stucco



Figure 2. Northern part of Structure A-16 after excavation (Ceibal Project).

sculptures, similar to those found on Structure A-3, Wat'ul K'atel's public temple (Smith 1982) (Figures 2 and 3). These sculptures closely followed Classic-period Maya iconographic canons, and there is no indication that the residents were foreigners. After the reign of Wat'ul K'atel, however, the quality of buildings and monuments deteriorated. In the excavation of a midden behind the East Court, we did not find many prestige items, such as greenstone and shell ornaments, which makes a clear contrast to the abundance of such objects at Aguateca. It is probable that the Ceibal rulers during the Terminal Classic period did not have the support of many court officials to manage affairs of polity and diplomacy, as well as to create elaborate art objects. The final end of Ceibal was relatively rapid. Our excavation shows that some elite buildings were ritually destroyed and burned. These buildings include A-16, A-14, and A-20 (Smith 1982).

This process at Ceibal is not unique. We can see comparable patterns in a substantial part of the southern lowlands. Many centers, particularly those in the Pasión-Usumacinta area, suffered rapid falls around 800 and 810 (Houston and Inomata 2009). Some centers, including Ceibal, Toniná, Tikal, and Calakmul, had some period of revival before the collapse. For a better understanding of political processes during the Terminal Classic period, we need to examine these broad regional patterns, as well as variations between different areas.



Figure 3. Stucco sculpture that decorated the facade of Structure A-16 (Ceibal Project).

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