

Tombs and Texts: NEW DISCOVERIES AT CARACOL

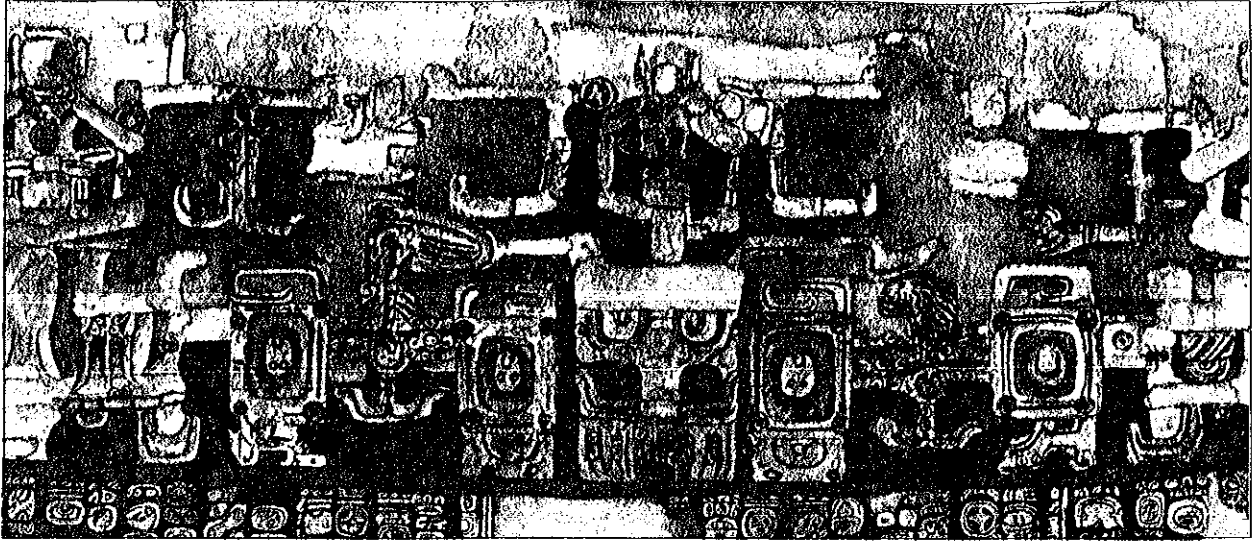
The ancient Maya writing system has puzzled scholars for over two centuries. Elaborately carved on stone, wood, and bone as well as painted on ceramic and plastered backgrounds, the finely formed blocks of text, referred to as hieroglyphs by Maya scholars, provide us with a huge body of knowledge concerning ancient Maya history. It is only, however, within the last 25 years that major breakthroughs have been made in reading the Maya texts...

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For many years the Maya hieroglyphs were believed to refer only to mythology and astronomy. This idea was finally dispelled and their historical nature was recognized in 1960. Their full decipherment has been proceeding at a fast pace since this time. Today some 60 percent of Maya texts can be read with some degree of certainty. We can translate texts that tell us of important events in the lives of Maya rulers as well as of events such as war that impacted an all members of Maya society. Together with the information gained from archaeology through excavating Maya ruins, we are now able to say much more about the Maya than we could just a few years ago. Some reconstructions of the Maya past have been based almost entirely on the hieroglyphic texts of the Classic Period (A.D. 300-900).



Entrance to the newly discovered Caracol tomb.



Caracol building frieze buried in the summit of Caana. Painting by Jagdish Chavada based on a drawing by Diane Chase.

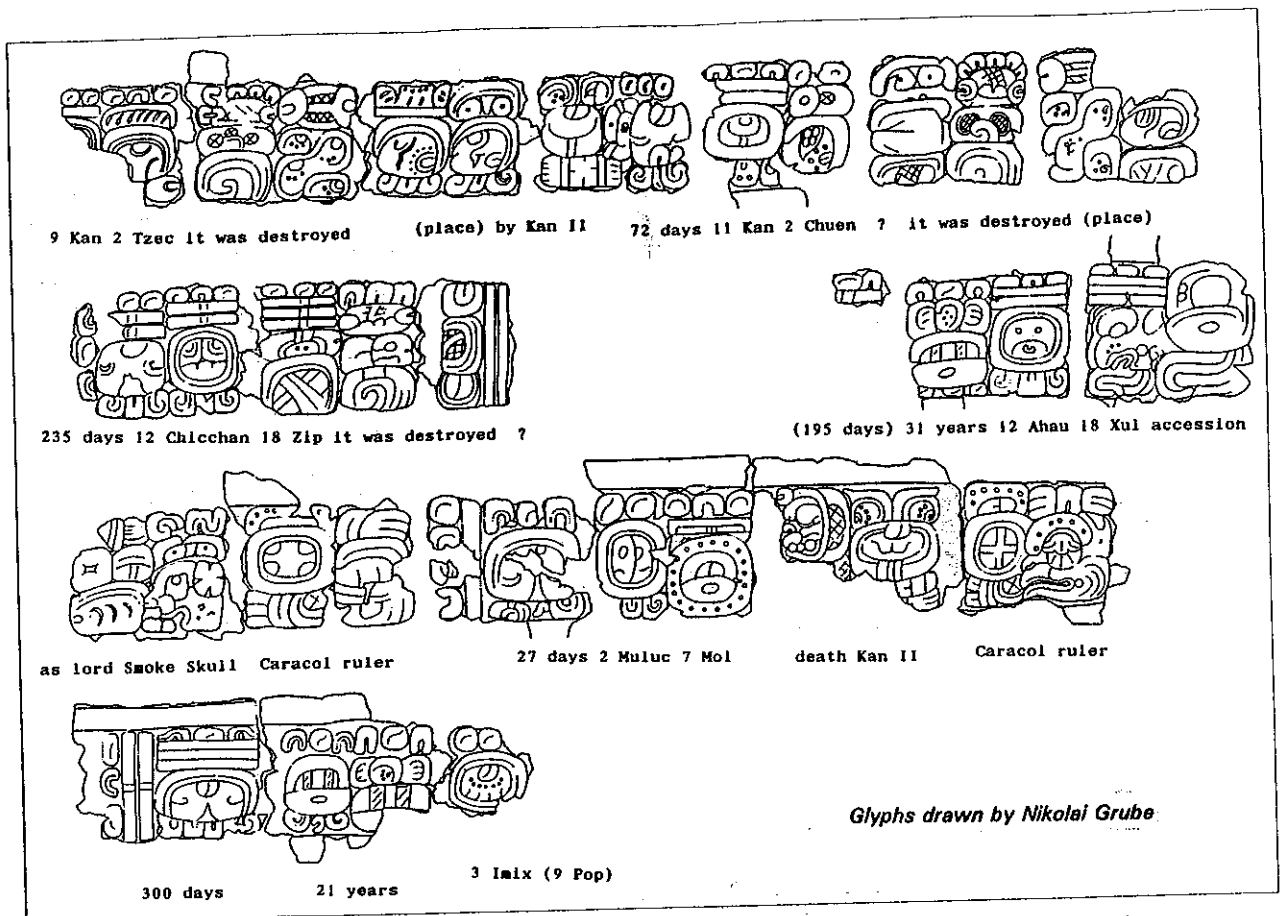
Indeed, the texts from Belize's largest site, Caracol, are doing much to change our current perception of the ancient Maya. Caracol has a long hieroglyphic record as well as an elaborate archaeological past. The best known Maya hieroglyphic texts are found on stone monuments - stelae and altars usually found in the open plazas in front of Maya pyramids. Caracol has over 40 monuments that contain texts. They provide information about Caracol covering a time span of over 500 years from the founding of the Caracol dynasty in A.D. 331 to the latest conquests of Caracol in the 9th century.

In 1986, one of the longest texts known from Belize was found on a stone marker in one of Caracol's ballcourts. Translation of the hieroglyphs on this monument describe Caracol's involvement in the defeat of Guatemala's Tikal in A.D. 562. This discovery completely modified our view of the Maya past by providing an explanation for a period of decline in the archaeology and monument record of the great site of Tikal. Subsequent archaeology at Caracol has documented that Caracol benefitted from its success in warfare and that the site in fact controlled a large

portion of Belize and Guatemala for over a century.

In 1991 another text was found buried in the summit of the most massive construction at Caracol - Caana. Stucco hieroglyphs were found still attached to the cornice of a completely buried building. The roof of this building not only contained a text, but was also decorated with a series of seated Maya figures - probably important rulers - sitting on the heads of large earth monsters. The hieroglyphic text is important because it provides us with a part of Caracol's history that is not recorded anywhere else at the site. Most scholars feel that most important information is found on the carved stone monuments; yet this frieze shows this not to be the case.

The frieze actually encircled the entire building. Only a small portion of the text was found. The section of text that was recovered, however, begins in A.D. 626 with a Maya date (9 Kan 2 Tzec) and records a hostile act by Caracol's ruler Kan II at a place thought to be within the Guatemalan site of Naranjo. Seventy-two days later (11 Kan 2 Chuen) a similar event happened at the



The hieroglyphic text from the newly discovered Caracol frieze, although incomplete, could provide valuable information about the social structure of the Maya who inhabited Caracol

same place; 235 days later (12 Chicchan 18 Zip) yet another war event was undertaken. The text then breaks and restarts to fill in a part of Caracol's history that was previously unknown. In A.D. 657 (12 Ahau 18 Xul) a Caracol ruler named "Smoke Skull" acceded to the throne at the site. Twenty-seven days (2 Muuluc 7 Mol) after this the former ruler Kan II died. The text then counts forward to the year A.D. 680 (3 Imix 9 Pop); the event associated with this date is still buried in the summit of Caana. This single text contains many pieces of Caracol's history, the most important being the death date of one of Caracol's greatest kings and information relating to Smoke Skull, a Caracol king who appears on not one of the known stone monu-

ments from the site.

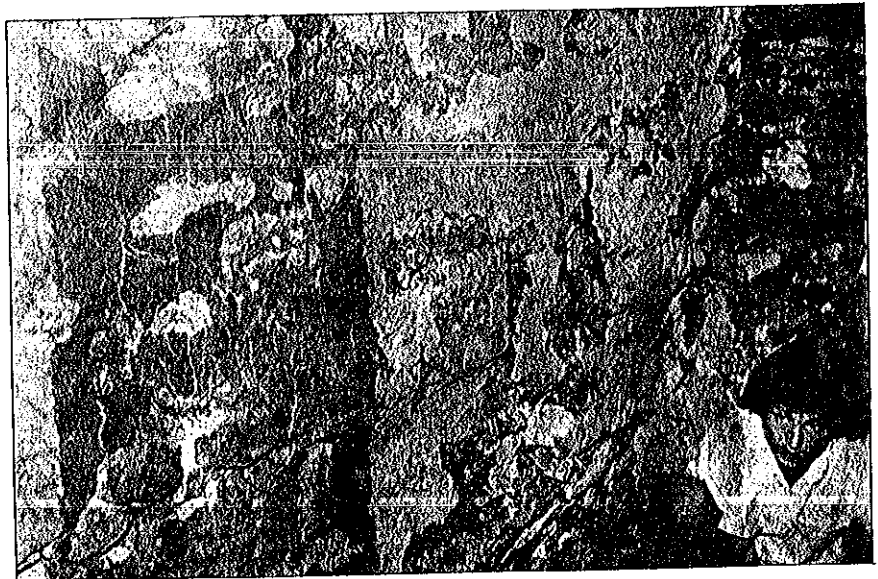
On May 7, 1993 yet another important find was made at Caracol. Deeply buried in the eastern pyramid on the summit of Caana a tomb was found. This tomb is of importance for several reasons. First, it is the only intact burial chamber out of four that are known from this eastern temple. The others were looted prior to the beginning of the Caracol project in 1985. Second, it is archaeologically significant because of its size, decoration, and contents. It is a huge chamber (19 cubic meters) that is plastered and painted with red stripes. A single individual with teeth inlaid with jadeite and pyrite occupied the chamber; the bones were so badly decayed that the individual's sex could

not be determined. Placed in the tomb with the person were 15 ceramic vessels, 1 wood vessel, 2 spondylus shells, 14 stone spindle whorls, 4 obsidian lancets, a stingray spine, a bone needle, a shell bracelet, jadeite earflares, a jadeite pendent, other beads of jade, shell, and stone, and at least two birds. A rear wall panel contained a very faint hieroglyphic text which represents the hurriedly painted death date of the person in the chamber; the date recorded fell in A.D. 537.

The tomb is also significant for two other reasons. The size and contents of the chamber and the position of the tomb in the earliest version of what became one of the most important pyramids at Caana suggest that it was an appropriate burial place for a ruler. Had no texts occurred with the burial, it would probably have been named as a ruler of Caracol, perhaps the remains of Kan I, who we know died just before A.D. 554 from texts carved on stone monuments. Yet the death date on the text does not correlate with any important dates known from the carved monuments. In addition, certain of the tomb contents, such as a bloodletting implement located in the area of the mouth, a spondylus shell in the pelvis, and items associated with the working of cloth, suggest that the badly decayed bones may be those of a woman. DNA tests will be done on a sample of the bone to try to determine sex. Thus, the newly found tomb at Caracol is very important as it casts doubts on traditional assumptions about the Maya made by archaeologists

and the people who study Maya writing by showing that "the biggest," "the best," "the most important" does not necessarily correlate with either rulership or with people mentioned in the historic record. If the burial proves to be that of a woman, this will further change our ideas about the role of women in Classic Maya society.

Recent advances in the study of Maya hieroglyphs have allowed us to know the Maya as a truly historic civilization. But history is fickle, especially the partial history



Author Diane Chase in new tomb. Note the striped wall.

often recovered through archaeology. Some important historic events, such as the warfare with Tikal recorded on Caracol Altar 21, can be verified archaeologically. However, other pieces of Maya history, especially those from contexts other than stone monuments may not be as well preserved and may be recovered only through chance discovery, such as the Caana building frieze. Yet the combined historical and archaeological information permits a greater understanding of the entire Maya past. □