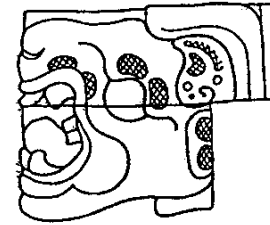


## Copán Mosaics Project

### Copán Note\* 7

August, 1989  
Copán, Honduras



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## The "First Ruler" on Stela 24

by David Stuart

Until the recent discovery of Copán Stela 63 (9.0.0.0.0+), the earliest dated monument known from the site was Stela 24 (9.2.10.0.0). Only a small fragment of the monument survives today, after its recovery from excavations beneath Stela 7, where the stone was reused as a foundation block for the later monument (see Morley 1920:78-79). The stone bears parts of a hieroglyphic inscription on two sides. Luckily, just enough of the text remains to allow Morley's secure reading of the Long Count date on the front (Morley 1920:81). Most importantly, however, the glyphs on the backside of the stela, though less well preserved, shed a tantalizing light on the early history of rulership at Copán.

Only four glyph blocks on the back of Stela 24 are readable to any extent. The first of these (at

pD1) is easily identified as an extended spelling of the ordinal number "first." This is composed of u, T4 na, the main sign tal, and the phonetic complement la. An identical glyph appears with this meaning in the king list from Structure 12 at Yaxchilan, where, like subsequent ordinals, it precedes a "seating" verb and the name of a ruler. At Yaxchilan, this glyph begins the sequence in association with the first ruler. The other ordinal numbers of that inscription appear in much the same form, except for the replacement of the na, "first," with the appropriate bar-and-dot numerals. What makes the Copán example so fascinating is that an accession verb (pC2) follows the ordinal number, reflecting precisely the pattern we see at Yaxchilan. The verb is not "seating," but rather the form of accession represented

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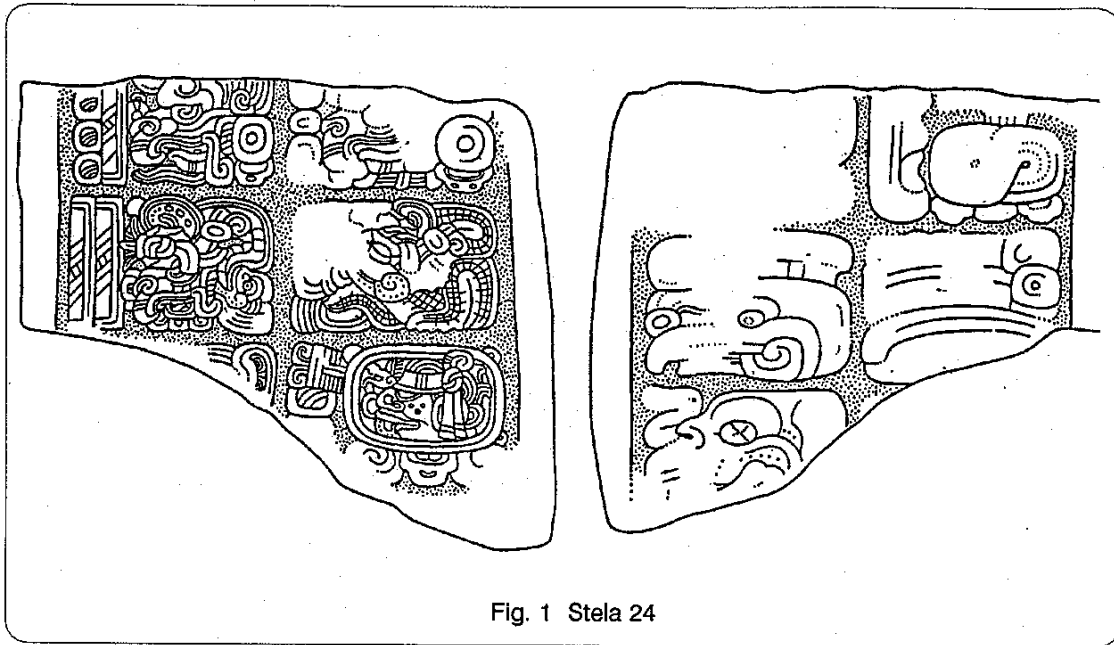


Fig. 1 Stela 24

by a *ti* vulture head with a T168 *ahau* superfix. The very same glyph appears in the inscription of Stela 31 at Tikal as the verb in the accession record of the ruler Curl Nose. The importance of the back of Stela 24 from Copán therefore becomes immediately apparent: we are here have a record of "the first in the rulership."

Knowing as we do the dynastic sequence of Classic Copán as recorded on Altar Q, we would expect the "first in the rulership" to be K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'. Interestingly, this is clearly not the name that follows the accession verb on Stela 24. The next two glyphs that presumably constitute the name of the king are weathered somewhat, but bear absolutely no resemblance to any known name or title associated with the first in the traditional sequence of rulers. The glyph at pD2 looks to be a human or zoomorphic profile sign above, perhaps, a *cauac* (some details were more apparent in Morley's day than at present). The second part of the name looks to be a human skull with a distinctive "etz'nab"-like decoration in the eye.

Who is this mysterious character? Several lines of reasoning—all speculative—are open to us. First it should be made clear that the ruler mentioned on Stela 24 need not be contemporaneous

with the date written on the front of the monument. If the ruler who commissioned Stela 24 is hearkening back to earlier history, which seems more than probable, we may have here a reference to the first member of a separate dynastic line that was conceivably quite early in Copán's history. Perhaps this is the only hint we have of the sequence of rulers who preceded K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'. Another alternative is that the ruler mentioned on Stela 24 is not from the far distant past, but more contemporary with K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' and his immediate relatives. We must remember that Stela 24 was discovered among the extensive ruins that once occupied the site of the modern town of Copán Ruinas, a kilometer or so from the Main Acropolis. Perhaps, then, the Stela 24 ruler is the first of a separate lineage that for some time ruled alongside K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' when both sites were much smaller than their respective extents in the Late Classic.

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