

A Formerly Unknown Fragment from the Hieroglyphic Stairway of La Amelia, Guatemala

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This brief note is aimed to present a fragment of a hitherto unpublished Late Classic Maya relief carving (Figures 1 and 2) in the collection of La Ruta Maya Foundation, Guatemala (*Registro de Bienes Culturales* [Registry of Cultural Heritage] Inv.-No. 1.2.179.85).¹

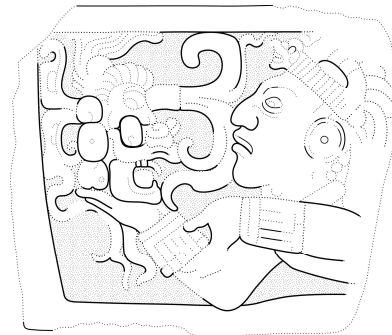


Figure 1. Photo of the fragment in La Ruta Maya Foundation (photo courtesy of La Ruta Maya Foundation, used with kind permission).²

Figure 2. Drawing of the new fragment (AML: HS1, Step 8), Guido Krempel, 2021.³

¹ La Ruta Maya Foundation is the only private organization in the region that seeks for, and aims to recover, archaeological objects that left the country illegally in past decades, with the purposes of repatriation to Guatemala. It also receives donations in Guatemala. Therefore, it is responsible for the custody and management of more than 3,000 Pre-Columbian objects, duly registered at the *Registro de Bienes Culturales* (Registry of Cultural Heritage), IDAEH, as National Cultural Heritage. All the collection is accessible for research to scholars and students, as well as to the general public through temporary exhibitions organized each year in Guatemala. The collection is also available for loan to national and foreign museums and exhibitions.

² Download: <https://classicmayan.kor.de.dariah.eu/#/entities/26421>

³ Download: <https://classicmayan.kor.de.dariah.eu/#/entities/26424>

The existence of this piece was first pointed out to me by Sebastián Matteo, who, in 2010, visited the former storerooms of La Ruta Maya Foundation in Guatemala City. Upon later inspection, the photos that he kindly shared brought back in memory the carved steps reported for the small site of La Amelia, Guatemala, a hypothesis that I herewith aim to strengthen by means of a comparative analysis. Based on the present evidence, I propose that this fragment should henceforth be considered as the left side of a heretofore unknown Step 8 from Hieroglyphic Stairway 1 of La Amelia (AML: HS 1, Step 8).

Six steps corresponding to this same stairway were found *in situ* and were first reported by A. Ledyard Smith, Harry E.D. Pollock and Edwin M. Shook on May 29, 1937, and shortly after published by Sylvanus G. Morley (1937-38, II:301-309; see also Foias 1998). In 1997, a team led by Antonia Foias (1998) investigated at La Amelia and conducted excavations of the hieroglyphic stairway. In due course, Rebecca Goldfine and Andrea Wilde found a new, well-preserved relief stone that got designated as Step 7. The latter was excavated just half a meter away from the lowest step of the stairway, which is situated at the southern side of the so called “Palace of the Hieroglyphic Stairway” (Foias 1998:7).

When comparing the other examples (see Figures 3 and 4), it appears clear that the fragment in the collection of La Ruta Maya Foundation does not match with, nor forms part of the seven previously documented blocks (see also Mayer 1991:5, Plates 1-6; Mayer 1995:12). Therefore, it can be assumed that it forms a fragment of an additional, so far unreported eighth step which likely originated from the same context.

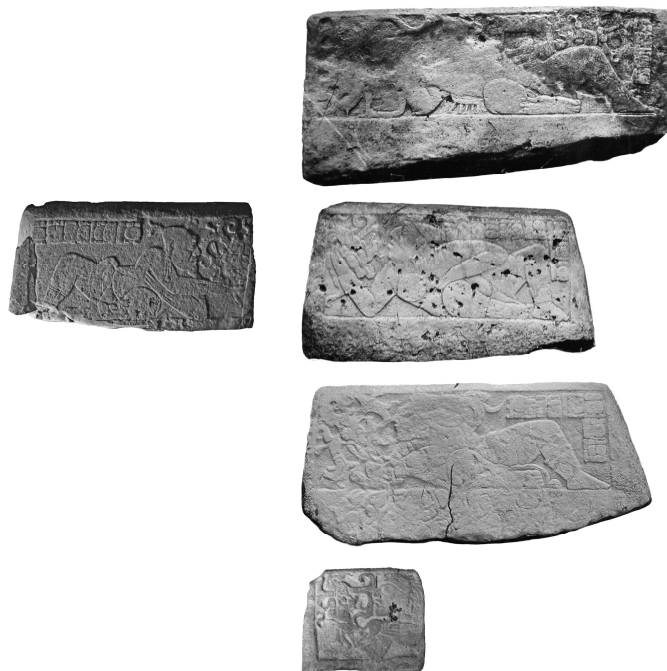


Figure 3. Steps 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8 of La Amelia Hieroglyphic Stairway 1 (Photos reproduced after Mayer 1991, Plates 1-6, Steps 3 (CI003201), 5 (CI707416), and 6 (CI709011) photos by Ledyard Smith and Edwin Shook, © Peabody Museum, Harvard University; Step 7, courtesy of Karl Herbert Mayer; Step 8, courtesy of Sebastián Matteo; all photos digitally enhanced by Guido Krempel, used with kind permission.

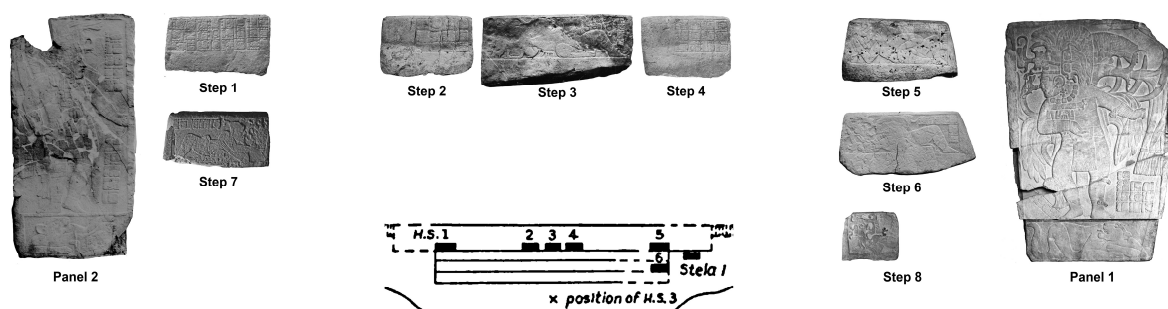


Figure 4. Photo compilation of Hieroglyphic Stairway 1, La Amelia, digitally enhanced and edited by Guido Krempel: Step 1 (CI707410); Step 2 (CI709019); Step 3 (CI003201); Step 4 (CI709020); Step 5 (CI707416); Step 6 (CI709011), photos by Ledyard Smith and Edwin Shook, © Peabody Museum, Harvard University; Step 7 (Photo by Karl Herbert Mayer); Step 8 (Photo courtesy of La Ruta Maya Foundation); Panel 1 (Photo courtesy of Karl Herbert Mayer); Panel 2 (Photo courtesy of Karl Herbert Mayer). All photos used with kind permission; map reproduced from Morley 1937-38: Fig. 45.

The new fragment measures 37.5 cm in height, 40 cm in width, and has been sawn off by the looters at its reverse side, probably on site, to lighten its weight for transportation purposes. The remaining depth is 4.5 cm.

The dimensions of the previously known carved steps from La Amelia do correspond well with the fragment in custody of La Ruta Maya Foundation (see Table 1), the closest matches being Steps 5 and 6 that are almost identical in height (referring to the height of the carved area plus the top border).

Description	Total width	Total height	Total depth	Carved area + top border
AML: HS 1, Step 1	82 cm	50 cm	36 cm	(25 cm + 4 cm =) 29 cm
AML: HS 1, Step 2	75 cm	50 cm	28 cm	32 cm
AML: HS 1, Step 3	130 cm	60 cm	37 cm	32 cm
AML: HS 1, Step 4	71 cm	48 cm	30 cm	(27 cm + 3 cm =) 30 cm
AML: HS 1, Step 5	103 cm	52 cm	21 cm	(34 cm + 3 cm =) 37 cm
AML: HS 1, Step 6	117 cm	54 cm	21 cm	(33 cm + 3 cm =) 36 cm
AML: HS 1, Step 7	85.8 cm	46.7 cm	NDA	(36.1 cm + 5.9 cm =) 42 cm
AML: HS 1, Step 8	40 cm	37.5 cm	4.5 cm (sawn off)	top border missing

Table 1. Comparative chart of measurements of the carved steps from the hieroglyphic stairway of La Amelia.

Presently, there is no valuable information as to when the here discussed fragment got illegally sacked from the site or how it was traded before having been acquired by a private collector. It was donated to La Ruta Maya Foundation in the year 2007, as part of a crate comprising a selection of other unregistered sculpture fragments (personal communication, Sofia Paredes Maury).

During the expedition conducted by the Carnegie Institution in 1937, A. Ledyard Smith, Harry E.D. Pollock, and Edwin M. Shook (published later by Morley 1937) were the first who reported about the stones of the hieroglyphic stairway of La Amelia. The site is located half a kilometer east of the name-giving arroyo La Amelia, in the municipality of Sayaxche. Next to the impressive Panel 1 (also misleadingly described as Stela 1 in the literature, even though it was clearly identified by Ian Graham as one of two panels flanking the southern stairway of the main acropolis, see Graham 2010:170), they found the remains of a hieroglyphic stairway, some stones of which are all glyphic, whereas others show human figures accompanied by short hieroglyphic captions. In total, six carved rectangular shaped stone blocks belonging to this exceptional hieroglyphic stairway were documented by the Carnegie expedition. According to Morley (based on the report by Smith, Pollock and Shook), “Stones 1, 2, 4 and 5 were more or less in situ in the line of the fourth step from the bottom, but Stone 3 had fallen to the plaza level below and lay opposite the middle point of the stairway; it would seem to have fallen from between Stones 2 and 4. Stone 6 was found in the roots of a tree in front (south) of Stone 5. Shook was of the opinion that this block stood at the left end of the same step, making a symmetrical arrangement. Search in corner below Stone 1, however, was rendered impossible by the debris which filled this area. It is even possible that another stela balancing Stela 1 on the right side of the stairway may be buried there” (Morley 1937:301). This latter assumption regarding a second “stela” that once flanked the stairway was later confirmed by excavations conducted by Ian Graham (2010:170), who found Panel 2, and correctly identified both monuments as panels flanking the stairway (see Figure 3).

In the 1960s, Edwin M. Shook revisited La Amelia and reported that the lower portion of Panel 1 had been stolen, and he subsequently transported the remains to Sayaxché. As date had it, the fragments were acquired by the Swedish collector Ernest Erikson, and later, following his death, went to the *Folkens Museum of Ethnology* in Stockholm. Finally, by means of a joint effort of scholars (among them Ian Graham and Karl Herbert Mayer), the fragments of Panel 1 were finally repatriated to Guatemala (see also Mayer 1994), where they today remain in the custody of the *Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología*, Guatemala City (Inv.-No. 1.1.1775) (Beliaev and de León 2013, 2016:81-83). The later found Panel 2 was transferred to Sayaxche where it resides until nowadays (Yates 2014).

In the course of the late 1960s, one of the hieroglyphic steps had already been looted from the site (Luján Muñoz 1969; Coggins 1972:18), and, according to Stephen Houston (1990:16) “all but one piece of the hieroglyphic stairway at La Amelia” had been robbed until 1990 (see also Mayer 1991:5).

Because of the heavy looting of La Amelia, it is currently impossible to conclude with certainty upon the possible original location of the here reported eighth block; unless the second (right) half of this step (and/or its carcass) would remain *in situ* and would eventually be found in the future.

As for the imagery of the new fragment one can clearly discern the left side of a recumbent male person holding a K’awiil-effigy head in his right hand. His left arm is stretched while the heel of the hand points towards the K’awiil head. Only the upper torso of the individual is preserved, whereas the rest of his body would be represented on the missing righthand side of this step. In this regard, the imagery of this sculpture is strikingly similar compared to Steps 3, 5, 6 and 7 (Figure 3), each showing a man holding the head of K’awiil in the right hand. Expect Step 7, which shows a man facing to the

righthand side, all other figurative steps (Steps 3, 5, 6 as well as 8) depict men leaning towards the left side. Just like the individuals on the other steps, the man on Step 8 wears a necklace and a headband consisting of horizontally arranged rectangular plaques (likely greenstone plaques), and at closer look a Hunal-head that is attached to the front of the headband can be recognized; a detail that is not visible on the other steps anymore due to severe erosion of each in the corresponding sections. That all individuals are holding K'awiil heads in their hands is highlighted by the accompanying texts, the best preserved one being the glyphic caption on Step 7: **u-CH'AM-wa-KAWIIL** *u ch'amaw k'awiil* "he grasps/takes K'awiil". Thus, the glyph captions on each figurative step clearly describe the imagery that shows a person grasping (or receiving) the head of K'awiil.

Unfortunately, most of the glyph captions that accompany the human figures on Steps 4, 5, and 6 are either severely eroded or are unavailable for closer inspection (despite Step 3, which remains in the bodega of Tikal, and the later found Step 7, see Foias 1998; unfortunately, the present whereabouts of the other steps remain unknown for the time being). Nevertheless, each figure clearly depicts a distinct male individual as protagonist, and a -more or less- well-preserved text caption. The glyphic remains on Step 7 lead to assume that the individual of each step is likewise accompanied by a caption beginning with a Calendar Round date, followed by the verbal sequence *u ch'am(aw) k'awiil* "he grasps K'awiil", a nominal phrase referring to the person depicted, and finally a sequence of titles, some featuring a toponymic title naming the corresponding polity or place of origin.

Given that all known steps are either full-glyphic (Steps 1, 2 and 4) or depict strikingly similar images of male individuals holding K'awiil heads (Steps 3, 5, 6 and 7), accompanied by a brief hieroglyphic caption, it is reasonable to assume that the still missing righthand side of the here presented Step 8 likely bore a hieroglyphic caption as well. Hopefully, these indications could lead to the identification and subsequent junction of the missing fragments in the future.

In sum, the hieroglyphic captions of the stairway from La Amelia record the history of the only known ruler of the site whose full nominal phrase has just recently been deciphered as K'ahk' Hoplaj Chan K'awiil Ajaw Bot (Vepretskii and Davletshin 2021). The narrative ranges from the birth of Ajaw Bot in 760 AD, through rituals conducted between 802 – 807 AD, including the grasping of K'awiil and the inauguration in front of the patron god assigned to K'inich Pa'witz (Aguateca), in company of Tahnte' K'inich, the lord of Aguateca (>770-802> AD). Being the last known ruler associated with the Mutul dynasty in the Petexbatun region, K'ahk' Hoplaj Chan Ajaw Bot presented himself as legitime successor of the Mutul dynasty and may have represented a selection of vassals from lesser sites in the Petexbatun region who were subordinates to this ultimate Mutul sovereign.

The identity of the individual represented on Step 8 remains unknown until the hopefully still preserved missing right side eventually resurfaces.

Acknowledgements

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grateful to Barbara Fash and Cynthia Mackey of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, for having facilitated permission to reproduce Shook's and Smith's Carnegie Institution photos from the Peabody Museum archive of the La Amelia steps as shown in Figures 3 and 4, respectively, and, last but not least, thanks to Antonia Foias for useful information provided.

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