

Maya Ruins of Tikal & Copán



Introduction

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Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination's essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food or wine.

The Maya religious centers of Tikal and Copán are one of Mesoamerica's cultural treasures, the remains of a great civilization that prospered for 2,000 years (peaking from 600-800 CE) and created some of the most impressive art and architecture in the New World. Still infused with their historical magic, they are yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Background.** We start off by providing some critical background information — focusing on cosmology and the role of the dynastic ruler — that makes sense of the forms and symbols of the unique Maya aesthetic.
- **Tours of Tikal and Copán.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we then turn our attention to two of the most spectacular Maya cities: Guatemala's Tikal and Honduras' Copán. For each city, we start by introducing the distinctive features of its art and architecture, isolating key features and concepts that you will see again and again as you make your way through the site. The tours walk you through the highlights, aided by high-resolution images and a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Bonus site: Quiriguá.** As a special bonus, we also profile the smaller Maya site of Quiriguá, an ideal addition to your existing Tikal and/or Copán itinerary.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook supplies logistical advice, detailed maps and links to online resources. Plus, we give our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

Contact us anytime

Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at founders@approachguides.com to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

We hope this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into the art and architecture of Tikal and Copán and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Have a great trip!



David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
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Continuing Travel in the Americas

New York City

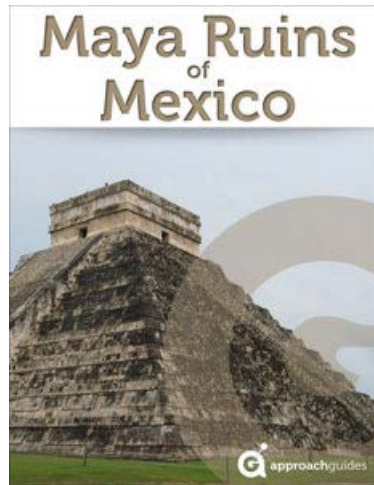
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Maya Ruins of Tikal and Copán

Version 1.0

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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THIS IS THE ACCOUNT
of when all is still silent and placid.
All is silent and calm ...
All alone the sky exists.
The face of the earth has not yet appeared.
Alone lies the expanse of the sea,
along with the womb of all the sky.
There is not yet anything gathered together.
All is at rest.
Nothing stirs ...
All lies placid and silent in the darkness,
in the night.

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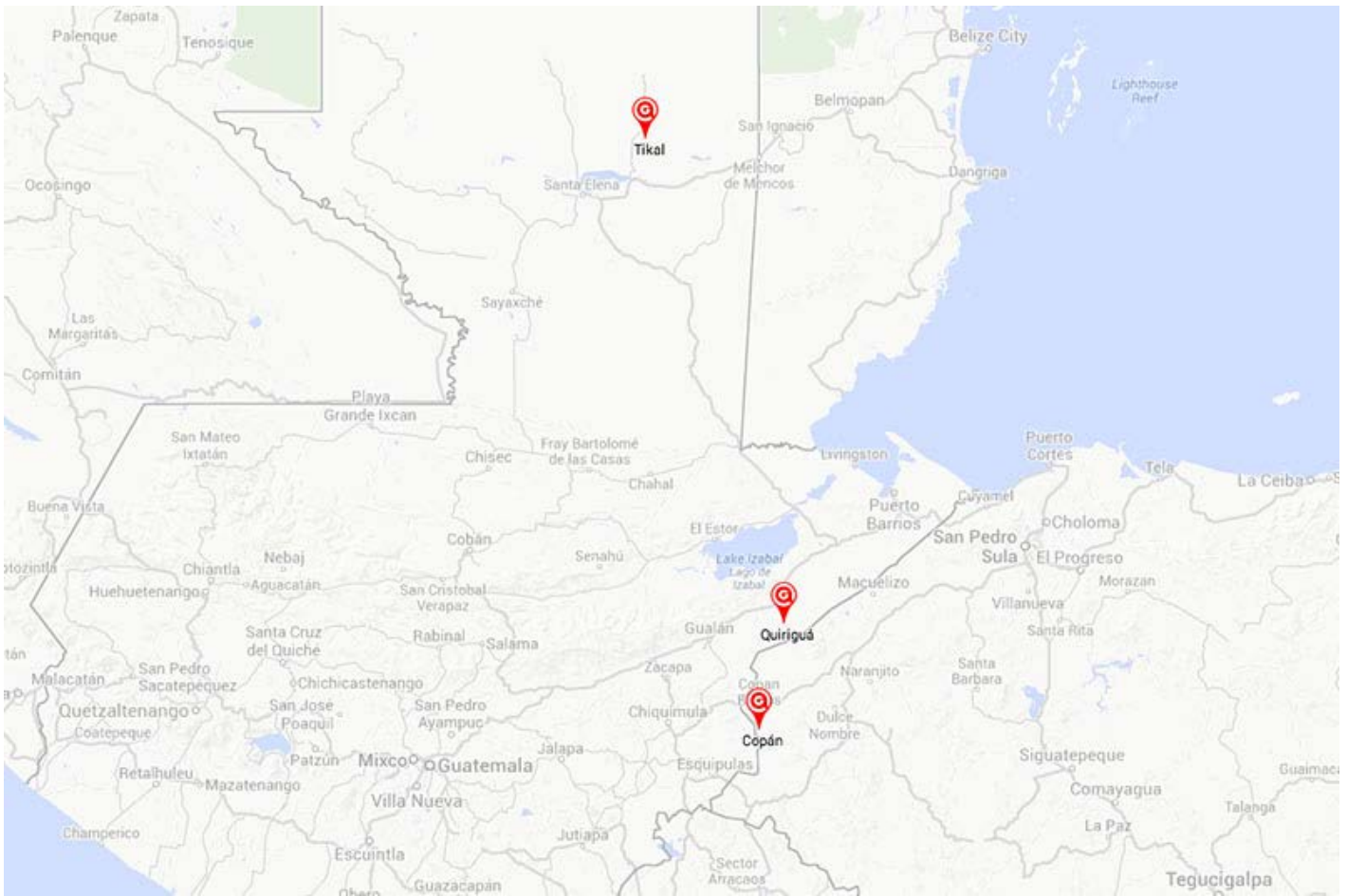
Excerpt from the Preamble of the Maya *Popol Vuh*

Translation by Allen J. Christenson

<http://aprch.us/popol-vuh>

PREVIEW
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The Maya in Guatemala and Honduras



Premier Maya sites in Guatemala and Honduras. See in [Google Maps](#)

The Maya civilization thrived for approximately 2,000 years in Mesoamerica, an area that encompasses present-day southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras. Peaking from 600-800 CE (the Late Classic period), it created art and architecture that, even in its ruined state, inspires contemplation and wonder.

This Approach Guide focuses on the premier Maya sites in Guatemala and Honduras: Tikal and Copán. It also includes a tour of the smaller site of Quiriguá, a worthwhile and potentially easy addition to your existing itinerary.

- **Tikal.** Occupying a massive site in northern Guatemala, Tikal was a superpower of the ancient world. The city's architecture, with remains of soaring temples from the Preclassic and Classic periods, is unsurpassed. It is striking in its scale and diversity of monuments.
- **Copán.** A mid-sized site located in western Honduras, Copán has a limited architectural legacy, yet it hosts more hieroglyphic inscriptions and sculpted monuments than any other Maya site. For travelers seeking insight into Maya artistic expression, Copán offers an incomparable experience.
- **Quiriguá.** A small site in southeastern Guatemala, Quiriguá is not visited by many travelers, but it should be. It has the largest sculpted monuments in the Maya world, not to mention

awe-inspiring zoomorphic sculptures.

Author Tip: *We encourage you to review a collection of background information on the Maya — a map showing the locations of prominent Maya sites, a timeline, a brief summary of Maya history, and a video by one of the foremost experts on the Maya — in the final section of this Approach Guide, entitled “Maya: The Big Picture.”*

Know Before You Go

Before beginning our tours of Tikal and Copán, the following sections offer a few critical insights into the functioning of Maya civilization that will prove quite valuable in making sense of each site's art and architecture.

- **Cosmology.** Cosmology was the foundation for the civilization's art and architecture, functioning as the source material for their underlying narratives, forms, and symbols. We provide the basics on the Maya worldview to help you appreciate the symbolic associations that monuments were designed to communicate.
- **Cult of the ruler.** The Classic period ruler was the primary human figure in the Maya cosmological universe; as the link with the world beyond the living, he was responsible for the prosperity of his people. We explain his fundamental role.
- **Sculpture as political tool.** The ruler used art and architecture to reinforce the importance of his cosmological role, thereby expanding his power and prestige. To illustrate this point, we reveal how this objective sparked the change to a new form of sculptural expression.
- **Maya stelae: style and evolution.** Stelae were the primary artistic form used to advance the cult of the ruler. We explain the general characteristics of the style employed in these carved monuments and how they took on unique expression in specific areas of Mesoamerica.
- **Cosmological symbols.** Finally, we examine the most common symbols used by the ruler on his works of art and architecture. You will see these symbols appear again and again on both tours.

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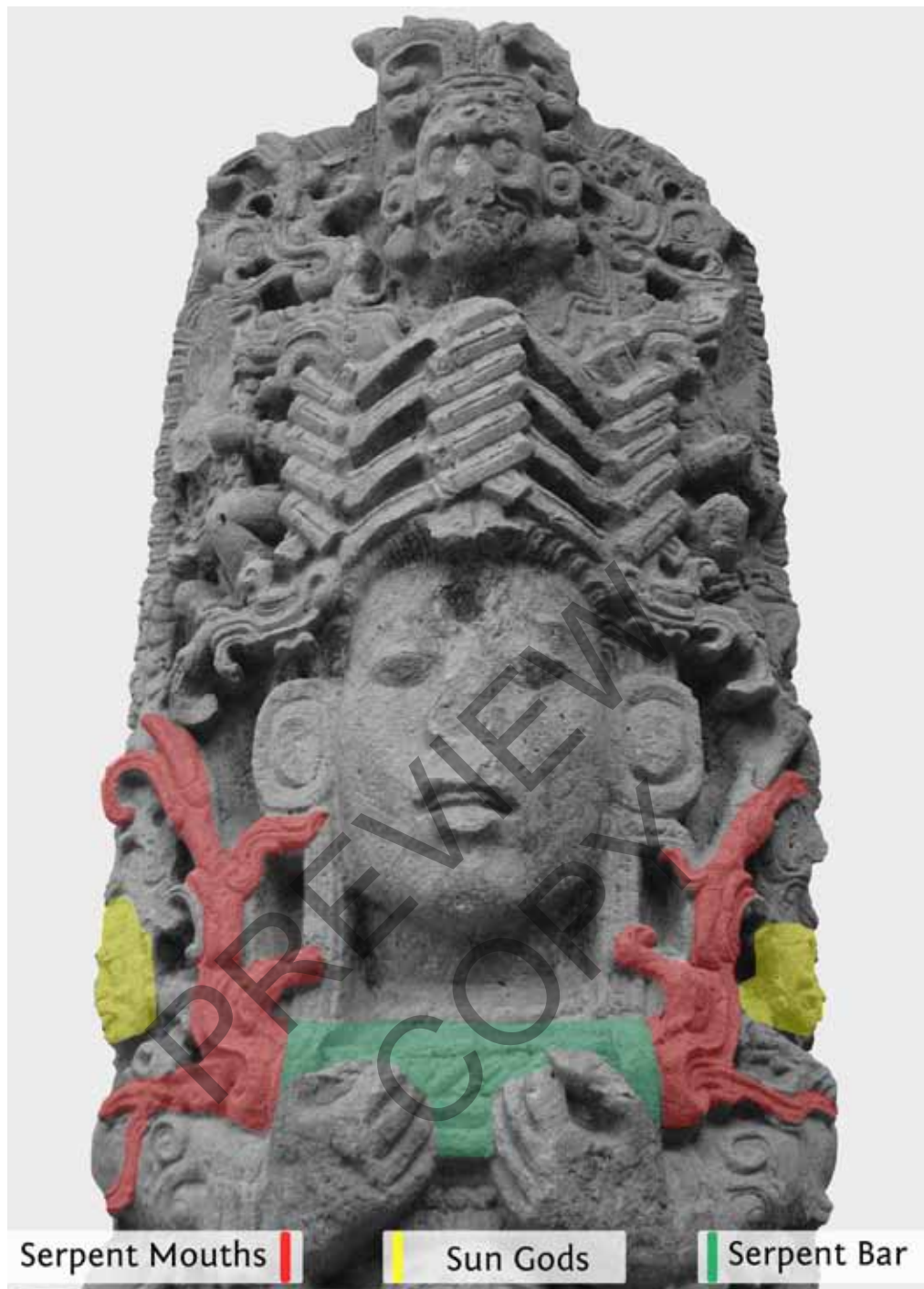


Fig. 7. Stela A, Copán. Highlights added.

Symbolism

The serpent was the means of conveying a hallucinatory vision; the shape of its body mimicked the wisps of rising smoke from ritual burned blood offerings. The ruler performed these offerings, and by holding the snake-shaped bar in his hands, he **reinforced his ritual role in communicating with ancestors (in the Underworld) and gods (in the heavens); it is the successful accomplishment of this role that assured the survival and prosperity of his people.**

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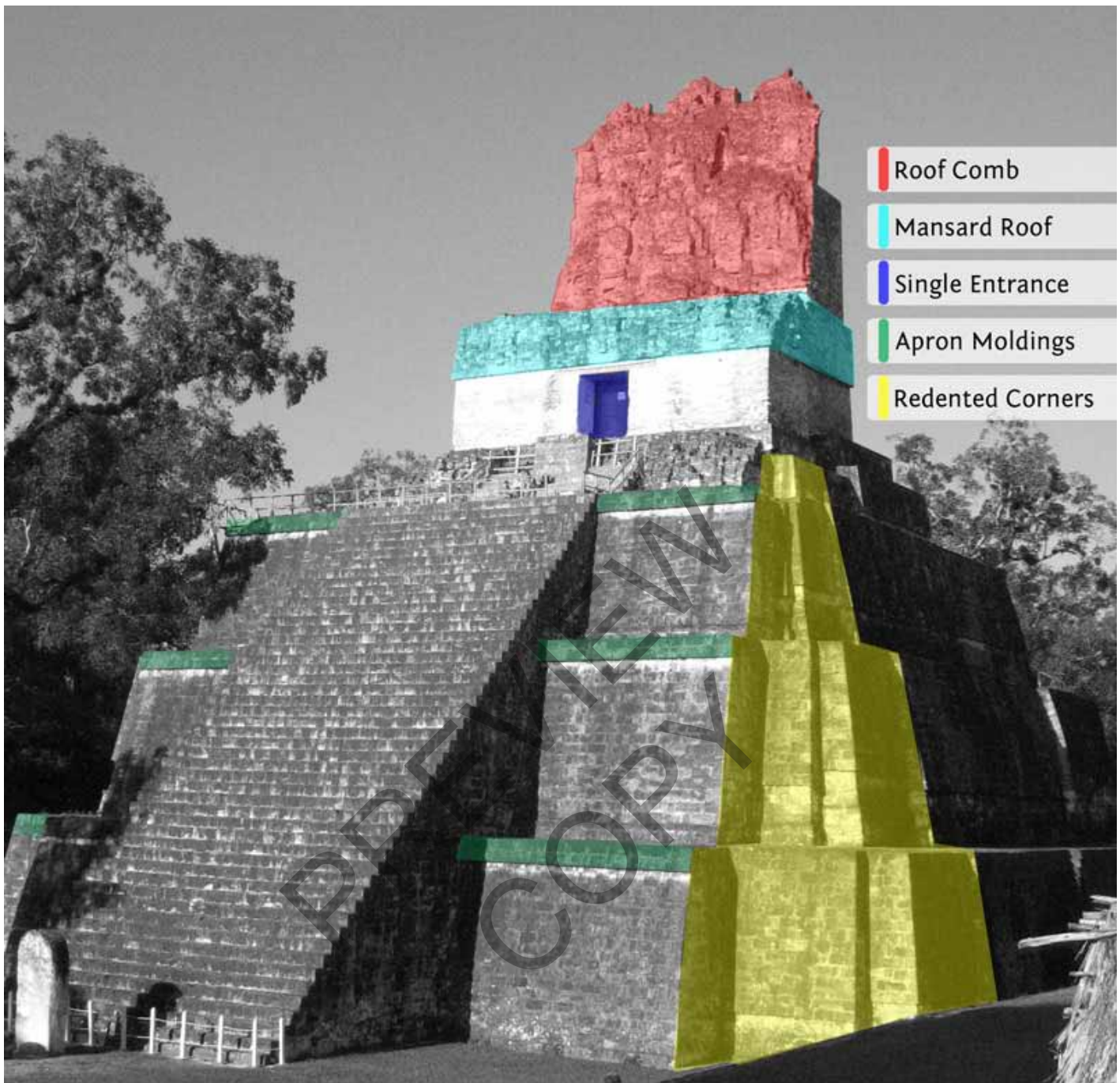


Fig. 20. Late Classic style temple (Temple II), Tikal. Highlights added.

Decorative Features

- **Massive decorated roof combs.** The roof combs atop temples (red highlights in [Fig. 20](#)) grew in size and their painted stucco reliefs became more elaborate. They are the focus of temples' exterior decoration.
- **Apron moldings.** Continuing the tradition begun in the Preclassic, each level of the pyramid is accentuated with apron moldings (green highlights in [Fig. 20](#)). They provide a subtle horizontal balance to the sharp vertical lines of the pyramid; further, the shadows that result

from the moldings' subtle outward projections add a three dimensional quality to the facade.

- **Stelae abound.** The Early Classic practice of complementing architectural art with free-standing stelae gains further momentum by the Late Classic. Elaborately-decorated stelae — carved from limestone blocks — reside on the periphery of courtyards, standing before architectural monuments; the stelae are fronted by low, round, flat-topped altars.

Twin Pyramid Groups

Building upon Preclassic triadic group precedent, Tikal's Late Classic architects paid particularly acute attention to the **arrangement of space among groups of structures**, rather than just focusing on a single structure in isolation.

Leveraging Jasaw's Great Plaza as a model, the framework for a distinctive layout was introduced, what would come to be known as a twin pyramid group: paired temples face each other across an east-west oriented courtyard; the courtyard is bounded on the north by a funerary offering complex and on the south by an administrative center.

This temple arrangement is discussed in more detail in the section entitled "6. Twin Pyramid Group Q."

Where to See It

First and foremost, Tikal is a Late Classic site. The Late Classic architectural style is best exemplified in the Great Plaza's Temples I and II, but it is visible everywhere. Given the large number of temples and their high state of preservation, Tikal is the best place in the Maya world to view this style.

Tikal's Late Classic architecture is visible in the following areas:

- Great Plaza: Temples I, II, 33.
- Temple III.*
- Temple IV.
- Temple V.*
- Temple VI (Temple of the Inscriptions).
- Twin pyramid groups L-R.

* While these structures are not specifically profiled in this guidebook, they are included on the map in the section entitled "Map and Tour Itinerary."

Map and Tour Itinerary

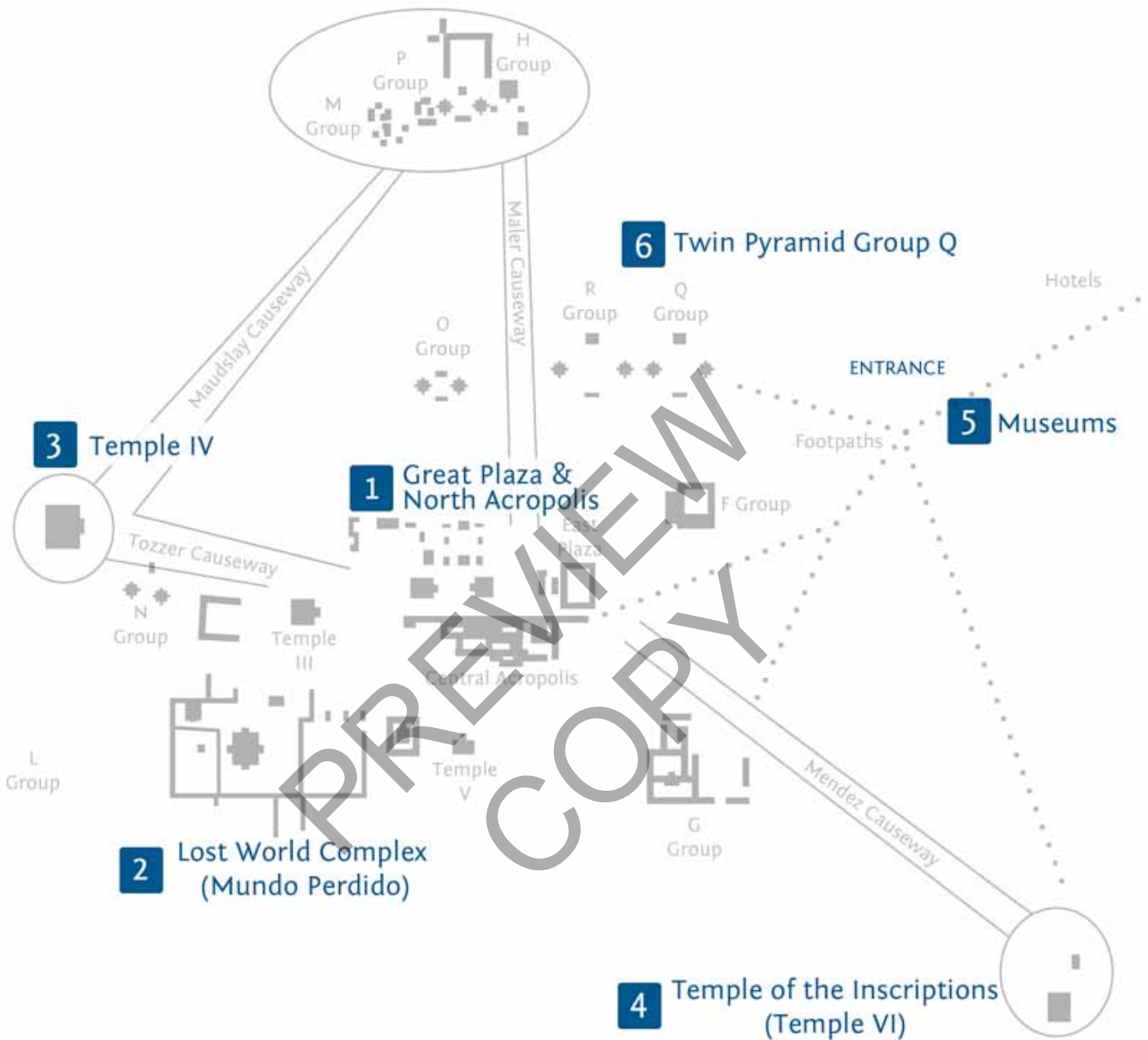


Fig. 21. Map of Tikal. Highlights added.

Tour of Tikal's Premier Sites

To make exploring this massive site easier, we have organized our tour of Tikal into six chapters, each tied to a specific area of great interest.

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1c. Great Plaza: Temples I and II

A New Sacred Center

The Late Classic transformation of the city began under Ruler 26, Jasaw Chan K'awiil. By building funerary monuments south of the North Acropolis, **Jasaw broke with historical precedent**, creating a **new sacred center** for the Late Classic city. The Great Plaza symbolized a new era for Tikal under Jasaw, free from foreign occupation and the negative memories associated with the Hiatus (562-682).

Quintessential twin pyramid group

The Great Plaza's arrangement became a continually referenced **prototype for the twin pyramid groups that abound in Late Classic Tikal**.

- Organized in an east-west alignment, **Temples I and II** face each other across a grand courtyard, symbols of earthly existence (light blue highlights in Fig 23).
- **Temple 33** anchors the northern edge of the courtyard (yellow highlights in Fig 23), symbolic of the heavens.
- The royal palaces and administrative structures of the **Central Acropolis** — comprised of a maze of 42 buildings on multiple levels — bounds the southern edge (dark blue highlights in Fig 23), symbolic of the Underworld.

Ritual activity

The Great Plaza's design creates two distinct areas of ritual activity:

- **Atop the pyramids**, the ruler and members of the society's elite conducted ceremonies inside the sacred inner chambers of the temples.
- **In the courtyard**, the ritual activity of the regular citizens focused on the altars and stelae at the bases of the pyramids. There was likely minimal interaction with those atop the pyramids, as there are only small platforms outside the temples and there is no visibility into their interiors.

The separation of social classes into two distinct spheres of worship appears to differ from Copán, where in the East Court's Structure 22 (profiled under Copán in the section entitled "2. East Court"), there was a shared ritual experience.



Fig. 27. Temple I, Great Plaza, Tikal. Photo by: Dennis Jarvis.

Temple I

Temple I (**Fig. 27**) was **dedicated to Jasaw Chan K'awiil** and was probably constructed around the time of his death in 734. His **tomb**, discovered deep inside the pyramid's interior, was built (and filled with Jasaw's body) first and the pyramid-temple was subsequently erected over it. Although designed by Jasaw himself, construction necessarily occurred under his son and successor, Yik'in Chan K'awiil. The Museo Tikal holds a reconstruction of the interior of Jasaw's tomb.

View from the base

- The temple faces **westward toward Temple II**; as the location of the setting sun, the western horizon was symbolically associated with death, which matches the tomb's funerary orientation.
- Temples I and II are connected as part of a **triadic group with their prototype, Temple 33** (detailed description in section entitled "1a. North Acropolis"). This arrangement links Ruler Jasaw Chan K'awiil (in Temple I) with his wife (in Temple II) and his father (in Temple 33).
- The structure rises **47 meters** (154 feet) over the Great Plaza.
- It **epitomize Tikal's Late Classic style**: pronounced verticality; large roof comb; a single stairway leading to a single-door entrance; and redented corners (yellow highlights in Fig. 28). For more on the style, see the section entitled "The Late Classic Style."
- The pyramid rises in **nine terraced levels** with sloping walls, symbolic of the nine levels of the Underworld, as was typical for Maya funerary monuments; the deceased ruler's spirit would have to pass through these levels in its ascent into the heavens.
- The **roof comb** — resting on the mansard roof of the temple below — originally held a stucco relief sculpture of the seated ruler (likely originally painted in bright colors), which is now only barely discernible.

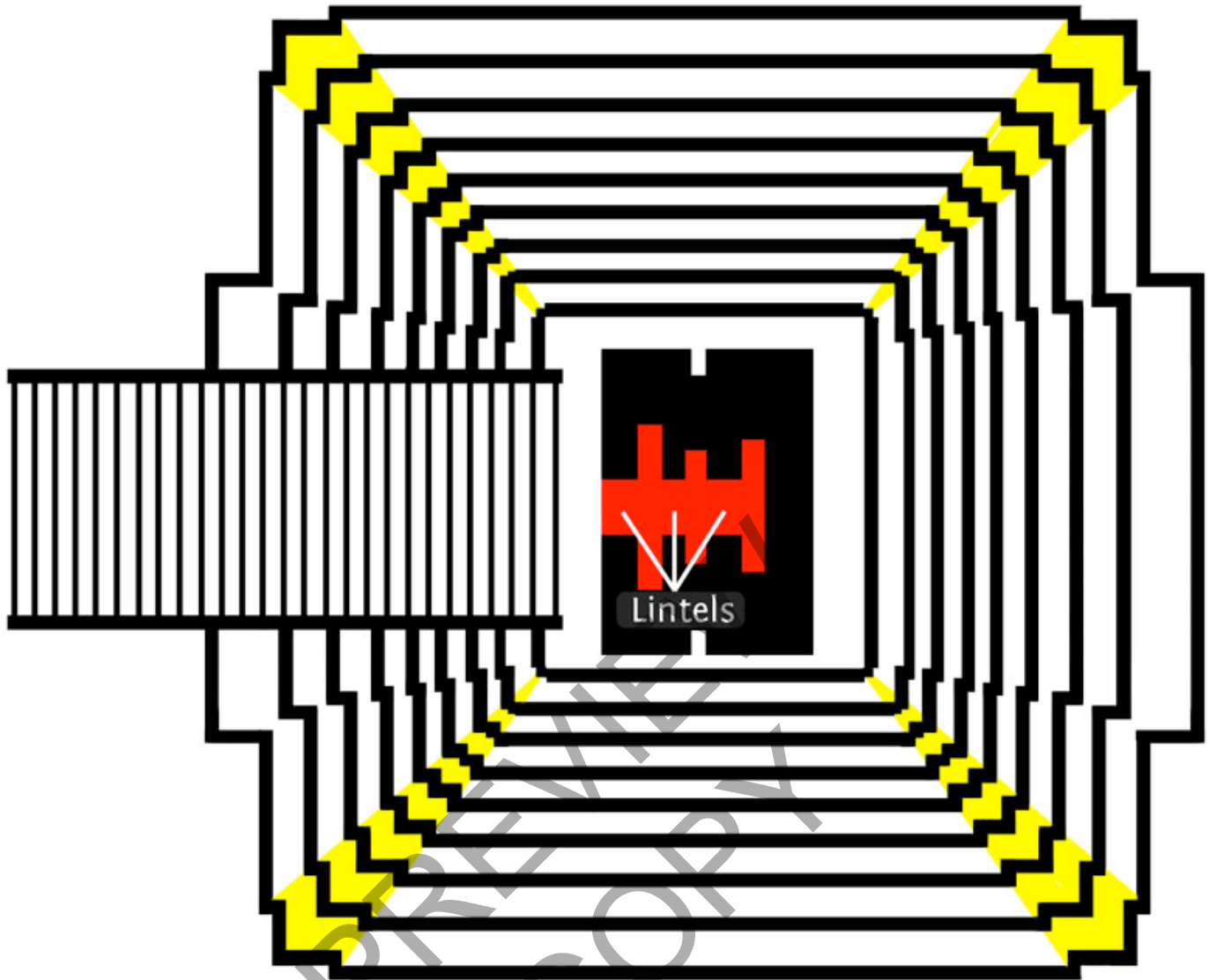


Fig. 28. Floorplan, Temple I, Great Plaza, Tikal. Highlights added.

View from the summit

- The temple atop the pyramid has **three corbel-vaulted chambers** (red highlights in Fig. 28), with the level of the floor rising from entrance to rear. Consistent with the use of corbelled vaulting, **the walls of the temple are especially thick**; in fact, the walls make up a greater portion of total interior space than the open chambers.
- Red wood beams from the sapodilla tree — best known for its gummy sap, called chicle, which is the source of the original chewing gum — were added as **lintels** above the doorways providing access to each of the internal chambers (Fig. 28). The lintels above the interior doorways held **elaborate low-relief carvings of the ruler surrounded by protective deities**: an enormous jaguar god that stands behind and extends its claw in defense of the ruler (see a [drawing of Lintel 3 online](#)); and a cosmic serpent that coils itself atop the ruler's head (see a [drawing of Lintel 2 online](#)). These deities will reappear in a similar context in Temple IV.

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View from the Base

- Temple IV **faces eastward** toward the Great Plaza, the location of his parents' funerary monuments.
- It is the **tallest temple-pyramid at Tikal and in Mesoamerica**, measuring 64.6 meters (212 feet); unlike Temples I and II, it rests on an enormous platform, 144 by 108 metres (472 by 354 feet). From a height perspective, the most comparable structure in Mesoamerica is Teotihuacan's Pyramid of the Sun (built 100-150 CE): while the Pyramid of the Sun is ever-so-slightly slightly shorter (64 meters / 210 feet), its larger base dimensions (224 x 224 meters / 735 x 735 feet) make it a significantly more massive structure. Further, when evaluating the tallest structures in Mesoamerica, the temples of the Preclassic Maya city of El Mirador (Tigre and Danta) should also be considered: while their pyramids are shorter (30 and 21 meters, respectively), they rest on tall platforms that boost their overall heights to 53 and 70 meters, respectively.
- Overall, Temple IV assumes a **squatter appearance** than its vertically-oriented Great Plaza prototypes: Temples I, II, and 33.
- The pyramid rises in **seven terraced levels** with sloping walls and redented corners.
- The enormous **roof comb** (Fig. 37) — resting on the **mansard roof** of the temple below (the dual slope quality of which is particularly clear, given the restoration) — originally held a relief sculpture of the seated ruler, however, it is now only vaguely discernible.

View from the Summit

The steep climb up to the summit is worth the effort for the fantastic views.

- Following the pattern set by his parents' temples, Yik'in's Temple IV has a **single entrance door** and **three internal chambers**; the level of the floor rises from the entrance to the rear.



Fig. 38. Lintel 3, Temple IV, Tikal. Highlights added. Photo by: Jose Fernando.

Lintels

The temple originally held wooden lintels over the entrances to the interior chambers. The lintel of the doorway leading from the exterior (Lintel 1) was undecorated, but those supporting the entrances to the two interior chambers were **carved with victory scenes from two wars** initiated based on the celestial position of Venus:

- **Lintel 2** depicts Yik'in Chan K'awiil seated on a palanquin (war booty) at the center of the composition. Behind him stands the enormous Jaguar War God in anthropomorphic form; the god extends his arm above the ruler's head in a gesture of protection. It was sculpted to commemorate his victory over an opposing city on Long Count 9.15.12.11.13 (6 February 744). See a [drawing of this lintel online](#).

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Copán's Architecture and Carved Reliefs

A Limited Architectural Record

Unlike many other Maya sites, Copán does not have soaring pyramid-temples with elaborate decoration. Its architectural legacy is understated. While Copán's architecture likely never competed with that of Tikal and other great building centers, its legacy is particularly limited given the following factors unique to the city:

- **The low amounts of limestone in the areas around Copán caused a long-term issue for stability.** Unlike most other Maya sites, builders in Copán lacked abundant supplies of limestone from which to make lime mortar. Accordingly, structures were built with minimal mortar or no mortar at all (only mud mortar was used in many cases). Instead, the exteriors of buildings were typically given a coat of lime plaster to protect them from the elements. Once the city fell, the lime plaster cracked and water was able to penetrate, weakening what were already structurally weak buildings, given their reliance on the Maya corbelled arch for structural support (see a description of the corbelled arch in the Tikal section entitled "The Early Classic Style"). As a result, many structures simply crumbled over time, negatively impacting Copán's architectural cohesiveness.
- **Architecture by accretion.** It was standard practice in Copán for the latest ruler to destroy and build over what had been built by the prior ruler, what might be termed an architectural style of accretion. Accordingly, Copán's visible structures do not reveal a historical chronology (as in Tikal), but rather a snapshot late in its development.

Premier Sculptural Works in the Maya World

Copán more than makes up for what lacks in extant architecture with its unrivaled sculptural monuments, renowned throughout the Maya world.

Expanding upon the Know Before You Go section entitled "Maya Stelae: Style and Evolution," we offer a detailed review of the characteristic features of Copán's stelae, which reach their apex under Ruler 13.

- **Single figure.** As at Tikal, compositions on the faces of Copán's stelae depict only a single figure, the ruler.
- **The size of the stelae is increased.** In contrast to the life-size proportions of ruler depictions at Tikal, those at Copán take on larger-than-life proportions, attesting to perhaps an even stronger cult of the ruler. Copán's stelae are only surpassed in size by those of Quiriguá, where rulers take on massive superhuman proportions.
- **Full-frontal view.** Breaking from the earlier tradition of depicting the ruler's face in profile, Copán's stelae show faces in full-frontal views.
- **Greater depth of relief and three dimensionality.** Under 18 Rabbit, Copán's stelae depart from flat, two-dimensional precedent and take on greater three-dimensional, in-the-round qualities: the depth of relief increases and decorative details adorn all sides of the stelae, rather than just the primary side. This design encourages the viewer to move around

the monument, taking in unique perspectives.

- **Static bodies, with dynamic facial expressions.** As at Quiriguá, while the bodies of figures are generally static — standing in a fixed position, rather than undertaking some action — faces reveal a sense of movement, in that rulers appear as if they might be speaking.
- **Portrait quality.** The faces of figures are significantly more realistic — approximating portraits — than the stylized depictions of Tikal. They are the most naturalistic in the Maya world.
- **The narrative function is elevated in importance.** The hieroglyphic passages inscribed on the stelae — centering on the name of the ruler who dedicated the monument and the date on which it occurred — are generally more extensive than those of Tikal, yet more limited than those of Late Classic Maya cities Yaxchilan and Palenque, where a true historical narrative was communicated.
- **Ornamentation is greater.** The relief work on Copán's stelae is significantly more detailed and elaborate. Further, consistent with practice in other Maya cities, they were likely covered with a bright red (iron oxide-based) paint.
- **Andesite medium.** Given the scarcity of limestone, Copán's stelae are made of andesite, likely quarried a short distance from the city's center. Of volcanic origin, the stone has a faintly yellow-green color, fine texture, and even grain.

Map and Tour Itinerary

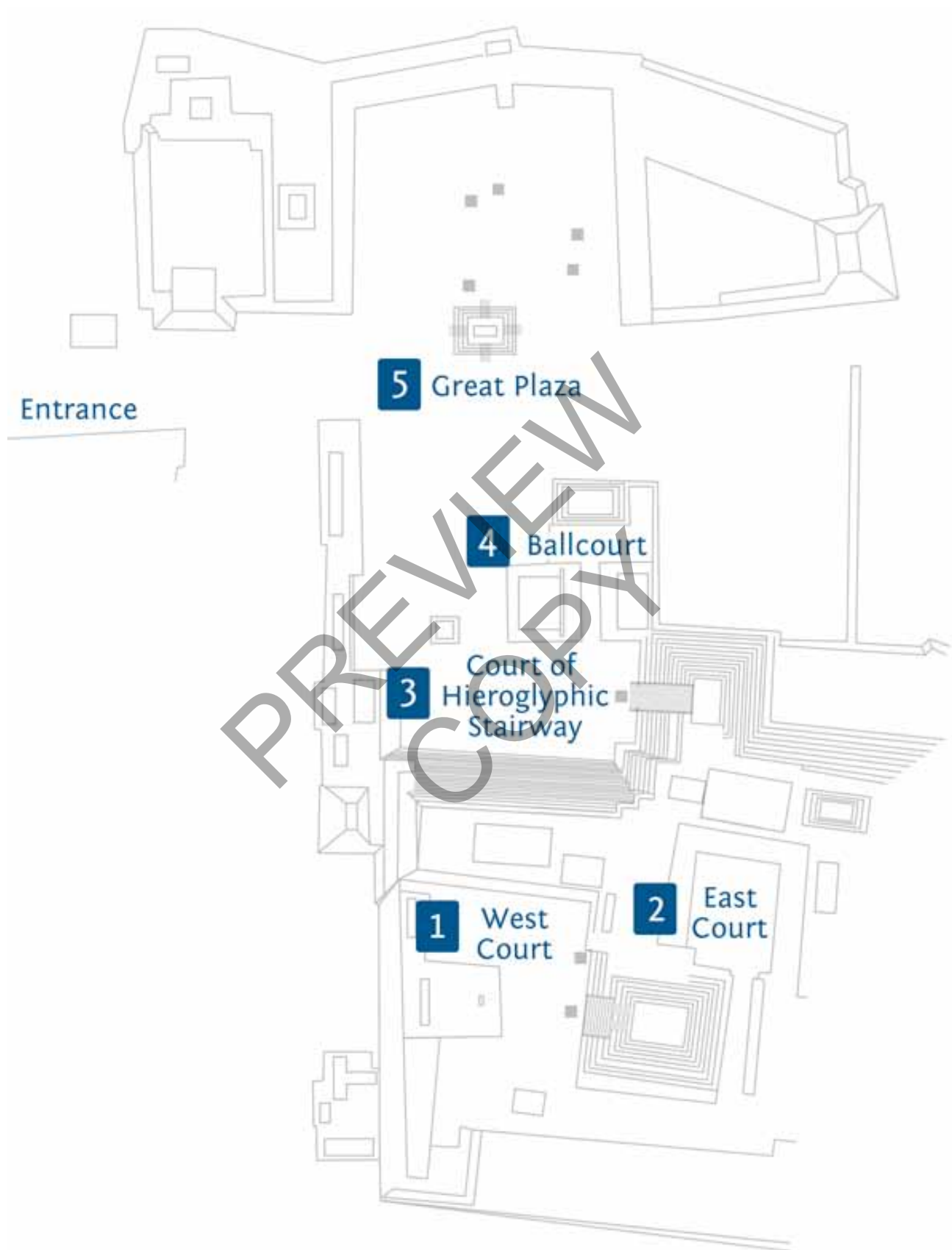


Fig. 46. Map of Copán. Highlights added.

Tour of Copán's Premier Sites

We have organized our tour of Copán into five chapters, each tied to a specific area of high interest. The order matches visitors' typical south-to-north movement through the site.

1. West Court.
2. East Court.
3. Court of the Hieroglyphic Stairway.
4. Ballcourt.
5. Great Plaza.

For each location, we point out what is most important, where to look, what it means, and how it compares with other locations.

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1a. Pyramid 16 and Rosalila

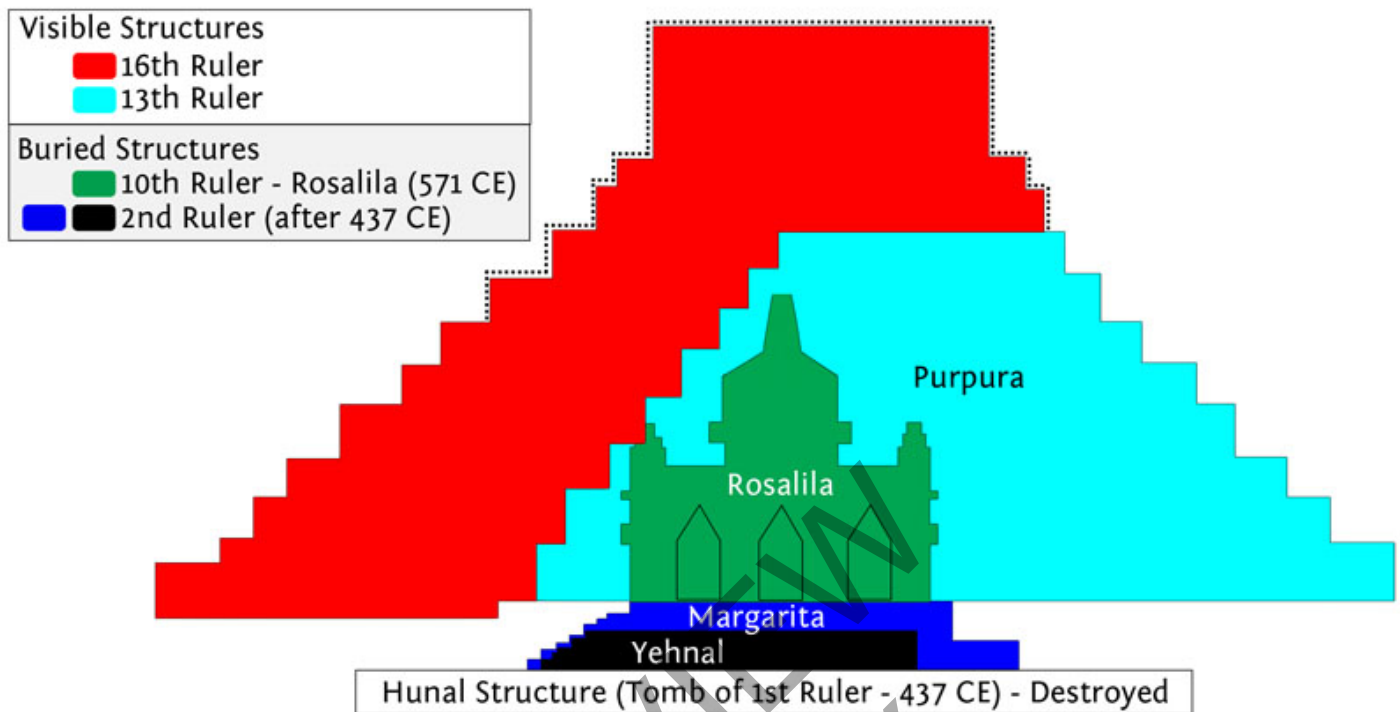


Fig. 48. Cutaway (view from south), Pyramid 16, Copán.

Background

Pyramid 16 is located on the east side of the West Court. It rises over the likely **burial site of Copán's first ruler**, a location that carried sacred associations throughout the city's history.

The burial structure itself — called **Hunal** (Fig. 48) — was built in the style of the Central Mexican civilization of Teotihuacan (with talud-tablero terraces), with which Ruler 1 likely had a close connection. Hunal was destroyed by his son, Ruler 2, and rebuilt in a new style. Subsequent rulers of Copán — 10, 13, and 16 (Fig. 48) — followed Ruler 2's lead, building sacred structures over the site of Hunal as a means of associating themselves with the founder of the dynasty.

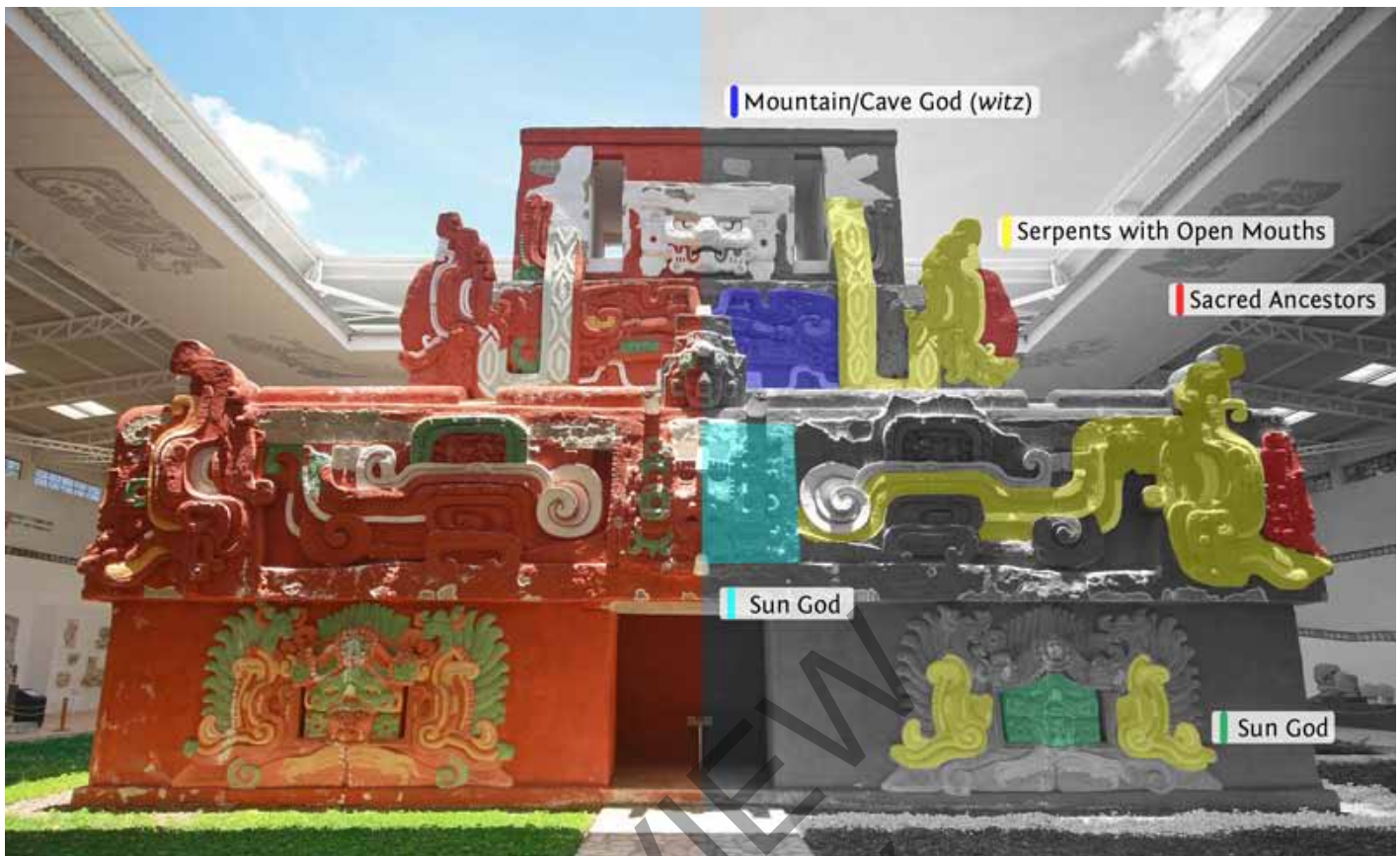


Fig. 49. West facade, Rosalila model, Copán Museum. Highlights added on black and white right half. Photo by: talk-towinik.

Rosalila

Rosalila remains **buried at the center of Pyramid 16** (green highlights in Fig. 48), just above the site of Hunal. Built around 571 CE by Copán's 10th Ruler, Moon Jaguar, Rosalila is the only temple structure in Copán from an early period to survive intact; all others were knocked down and built over. A replica of Rosalila stands in the Museum (Museo de Escultura Maya), where the decoration described below can be appreciated; further, it has been reproduced in its original bright colors, which afford good insight into the Maya architectural aesthetic.

Overall, the structure's decoration reveals the Maya cosmological worldview: the ruler reiterates his role — symbolically standing in the central door — as bridge linking the heavens, earth, and Underworld. As intermediary, he assures the continued rejuvenation of the agricultural cycle required for his citizens' prosperity.

- Flanking the central door are birds' heads; from their mouths emerge images of the **Sun God** (green highlights in Fig. 49). The sides of each bird's head is graced with **open serpent mouths** (yellow highlights in Fig. 49).
- Above the door is another mask of the **Sun God** (light blue highlights in Fig. 49). From his image glide **serpents** (yellow highlights in Fig. 49), the vehicles of otherworldly communications; their open mouths on the corners of the structure reveal the faces of **sacred ancestors**, transported from the Underworld (red highlights in Fig. 49).

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1b. Altar Q

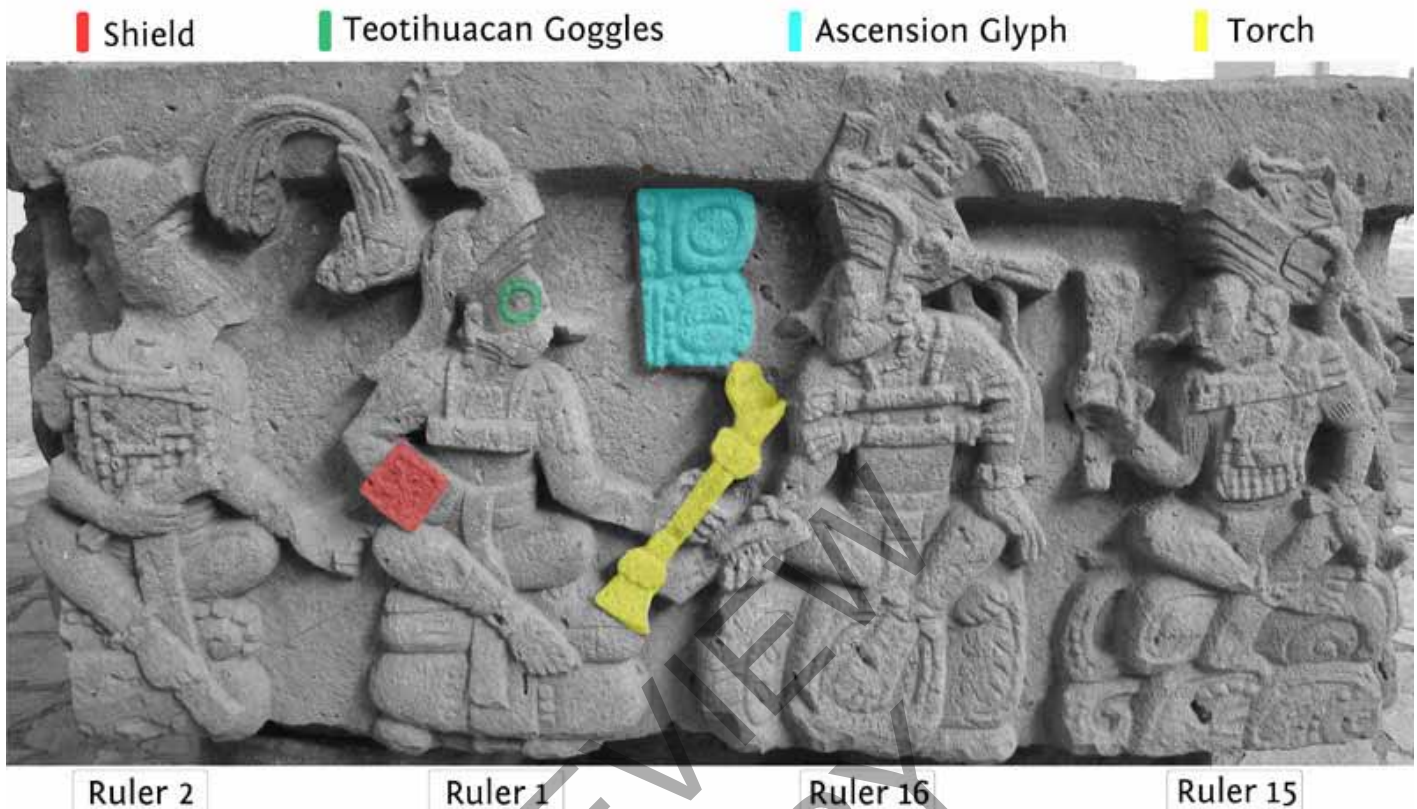


Fig. 50. Altar Q, west face, Ruler 1 passing torch to Ruler 16, Copán. Highlights added.

Background

Dating from Long Count 9.16.12.5.17 (30 June 763) and erected to commemorate Ruler 16's ascension to the throne, Altar Q holds a chronological list of Copán's rulers. The original of this altar is in the Museum.

Decoration

The sides of the square altar carry bas-relief images of Rulers 1 through 16 (see an [image of all four sides online](#)), seated on cushions and holding torches (symbols of passed authority); the cushions hold name glyphs revealing the rulers' identities.

On the primary (west) face

The west face — pointing out into the West Court's plaza — is the focal point of Altar Q's decoration.

- The founder of the dynasty (K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo') passes a torch (yellow highlights in Fig. 50) to the latest in succession, Ruler 16 (Yax Pasaj); the glyph between the two figures records his ascension date (light blue highlights in Fig. 50).
- The symbolic transfer of power from the city's respected founder was meant to confer much-needed legitimacy on Ruler 16.
- The founder is depicted as a **Teotihuacan warrior**, attesting to the city's historical connection with this Central Mexican civilization: goggles over his eyes (green highlights in Fig. 50); a square shield with a war serpent motif on his right arm (red highlights in Fig. 50); and a hybrid quetzal-macaw bird on his headdress. Ruler 1's goggle eyes, in particular, are a Teotihuacan trademark: symbolic of the Mexican Rain God, Tlaloc, they were inspired by the deity's original incarnation, that of a midnight owl who flies into the dark Underworld, retrieves a water serpent, and releases its waters upon the earth as rain.

On the top of the altar

The top of the altar holds an inscription with thirty-six hieroglyphs, recounting Ruler 1's ascension in 426 and the critical transfer of authority to Ruler 16 in 763.

- The glyphs are oriented such that they appear to have been designed to be read from the steps of Pyramid 16 to a congregation standing in front (west) of the altar.
- The text begins in the upper left corner, flows downward in paired glyphs, and then continues the pattern from the top.

A New Style of Relief

Altar Q departs from the typical style of relief carving at Copán. The style employs two new distinct features:

- **High two-plane relief.** Altar Q's relief decoration consists of two distinct planes. The figures reside on the outer plane; they are raised off the lower plane, which is undecorated (Fig. 50). The details of the figures on the outer plane are executed in low relief, but are otherwise flat. This distinctive quality makes the figures stand out and the narrative even clearer.
- **Dynamic interaction among depicted figures.** Unlike the static single figures of earlier relief work on stelae, the rulers on Altar Q gesture, interact, and assume dynamic positions (Fig. 50). They further begin to touch and intrude into each other's personal space.

Overall, the style of Altar Q bears some resemblance to that of the **stone-carved reliefs of Palenque and Yaxchilan**, two Late Classic Maya sites in Chiapas, Mexico. This could be the influence of Ruler 16's mother, who might have been born nearby those Mexican Maya centers.

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1c. Stela P



Fig. 51. Stela P, Copán. Highlights added.

Background

Erected under Copán's 11th ruler, K'ak' Chan Yopaat aka Smoke Serpent (ruled 578-628), on the Long Count period ending 9.9.10.0.0 (21 March 623), Stela P originally stood in front of Rosalila

(now enclosed in Pyramid 16).

Decoration

- Ruler 11 stands, assuming a trademark position: his hands clasped on a **ceremonial serpent bar** (red highlights in Fig. 51). As is typical, **deities** (yellow highlights in Fig. 51) emerge from the **serpent mouths**, as conjured by the ruler, the bridge linking the world of the living with that of the ancestors and the divine in the Underworld and heavens.
- He wears a **headdress with a bird-like mask** (green highlights in Fig. 51). In Maya cosmology, **the Maize God was associated with the quetzal bird**, whose green plumage resembles the color of corn leaves; this headdress taps into this connection, signaling that he is in **communication with the Maize God**. Ruler-as-Maize God is a recurring theme in Copán's stelae.

From Stucco to Stone at Copán

Copán's first stelae appear under Stela P's sponsor, Smoke Serpent, who initiated the move from modeled stucco decoration — where figures were adhered to the walls of architecture — to free-standing stone monuments. Stelae gained further momentum under Ruler 12 (ruled 628-695) and reached their apex under Ruler 13 (ruled 695-738).

While this move from stucco to stone certainly was attributable to the rise of strong leaders who sought to expand their power, a natural resource issue might have also played a role: deforestation. Trees, increasingly in short supply, were required as fuel to burn the limestone — yet another precious resource in Copán — that would yield lime, one of three critical ingredients in the production of stucco.



Fig. 52. Comparison, Stela P (left) and Stela B (right), Copán.

A Stylistic Evolution

The stelae created during the reigns of Rulers 11 and 12 — of which Stela P is probably the best example — adhere to a much flatter two-dimensional style than those made approximately 100 years later in the Great Plaza under Ruler 13.

Compare Stela P (erected in 623) with Stela B executed under Ruler 13 (erected in 731) in **Fig. 52**. Ruler 13's stelae are nearly sculpted in the round, with tremendous depth and greater naturalism.

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Stelae

Massive Scale

Quiriguá's stelae — all dating from the Late Classic period after winning independence from Copán in 738 — are the **largest in the Maya world**. Their massive scale is likely attributable to Quiriguá's desire to symbolically assert its independence from and superiority to Copán with figures that dwarfed those of its former overlord city-state.

Appearance

While the style of Quiriguá's stelae was highly influenced by that of Copán, it displays a number of unique qualities.

- **Flat bodies.** Figures exhibit generally flat two-dimensional bodies, a step back from the three-dimensionality of those at Copán; the transformation to a flatter style is discussed below. The change is most clearly manifest in the orientation of rulers' feet: at Quiriguá, they are positioned heel-to-heel and spread at 180 degrees (flat to the carved faces of stelae), compared to a spread of 90 degrees under Copán's 18 Rabbit.
- **Three-dimensional faces.** Despite newly flattened bodies, figures maintain Copán's deep-relief faces depicted in full-frontal view.
- **Portraits.** Although less so than at Copán, faces of figures are more realistic — approximating portraits — than the stylized depictions of Tikal.
- **Static postures with dynamic faces.** While rulers stand in static poses, their faces often convey movement with open mouths, as if in speech.
- **Hieroglyphic texts focused on dedication.** Hieroglyphic texts resemble those of Copán. Confined to the sides of stelae, they focus on the name of the ruler who dedicated the monument and the date on which it occurred, rather than communicate a detailed historical narrative.
- **Original red color.** Stelae were likely covered with a red (iron oxide-based) paint. In Maya cosmology, the color red was associated with the rising sun, blood, divine energy, and birth (rebirth).
- **Sandstone medium.** Quiriguá's stelae are made from single blocks of local red sandstone, likely quarried a short distance upriver from the city. They were carved — using stone tools exclusively, as was the case throughout the Maya world — once the massive stones were erected by way of wooden ramps, ropes, and pulleys.

Like in Copán, stelae **occupy the center of the city's main plaza** and are monuments unto themselves, free of architectural associations.



Fig. 75. Quiriguá stelae (left to right): Stela F, south face (761); Stela D, north face (766); Stela E, north face (771).

Stylistic Transformation

Stelae erected in the North Platform by Kawak Sky, the most prolific of Quiriguá's rulers, reveal a stylistic transformation: **rounded, vaguely three-dimensional bodies become flatter and more two dimensional**, so as to better emphasize a ruler's consistently three-dimensional face.

Compare Stelae F, D, and E, arranged in chronological order in **Fig. 75**.

- **Stela F.** Dedicated in 761, Stela F is the most three dimensional in style: many of the ruler's decorative features curve around the squared edges of the stela, and are therefore only visible when standing off to either side. This design encourages the viewer to move around the monument, taking in unique perspectives. Given its three-dimensional bias, it is the most indebted to the style that prevailed in Copán.

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Fig. 77. Stela C, south face, Quiriguá. Highlights added.

Decoration: South Face

- Stela C's south face **breaks from standard ruler depiction iconography**: ruler as intermediary with the Underworld and heavens. Here, Kawak Sky takes on an even more glorified role, that of a creator god himself.
- Rather than holding a ceremonial bar with serpent heads on the ends (the standard intermediary iconography), Kawak Sky holds an **object of cosmological creation, a throne**

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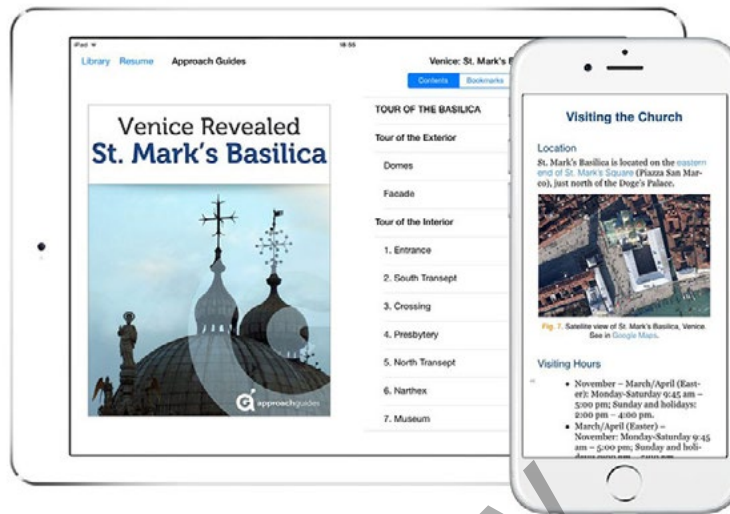
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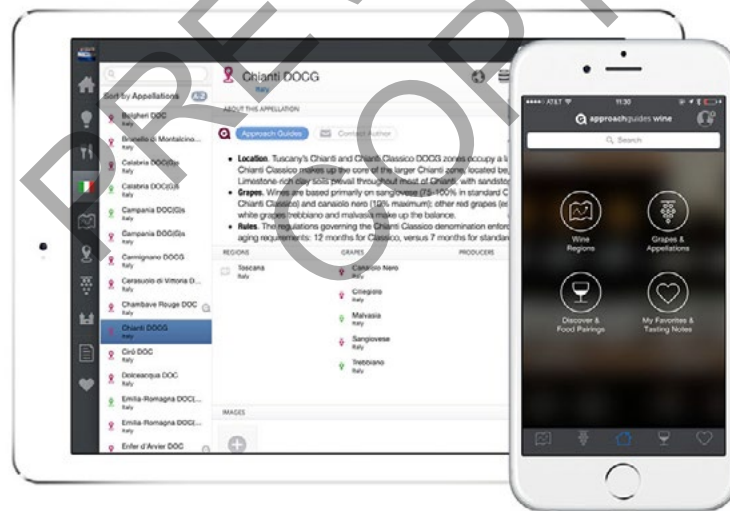
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