

RESEARCH ADVANCE

**IDENTIFYING THE PROVENANCE
OF PUERTO BARRIOS ALTAR**

Identificando la procedencia del Altar de Puerto Barrios

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Figure 1. Puerto Barrios altar (photograph of “Atlas Epigráfico de Petén” project, courtesy of MNAE, Guatemala).

ABSTRACT. *The provenance of Puerto Barrios altar hosted in the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of Guatemala remained unknown despite its good preservation and legible text. Previously it was attributed to the western part of the Maya area. A new epigraphic analysis based on the documentation undertaken by the “Atlas Epigráfico de Petén” project demonstrates that it comes from the region of Itsimte-Sacluk (western Peten).*

KEYWORDS. *Maya Lowlands; Peten; Itsimte; Late Classic; Mayan epigraphy.*

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RESUMEN. *La procedencia del altar de Puerto Barrios que se encuentra en el Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala permaneció desconocida a pesar de la buena conservación del monumento y su texto legible. Anteriormente, era atribuido a la parte occidental del área maya. Un nuevo análisis epigráfico, basado en la documentación realizada por el proyecto «Atlas Epigráfico de Petén», demuestra que este altar proviene de la región de Itsimte-Sacluk (Petén occidental).*

PALABRAS CLAVE. *Tierras Bajas mayas; Petén; Itsimte; Clásico Tardío; epigrafía.*

INTRODUCTION

THE THIRD SEASON OF THE “ATLAS EPIGRÁFICO DE PETÉN” project was dedicated to re-documentation of the monuments of the *Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología* (MNAE) in Guatemala City (Beliaev & De León 2016), including the so-called Puerto Barrios (or Ericastilla) altar (MNAE inventory number 13907, register number 1.12.1.0312). This altar was looted and practically taken out of the country when the Guatemalan financial police confiscated it in April 1986 in Puerto Barrios, Izabal (Prensa Libre 1986). The monument was verified as authentic by the *Departamento de Monumentos Prehispánicos y Coloniales* of the *Instituto de Antropología e Historia* and was moved to the MNAE, where forms part of the permanent exhibition (Figure 1).

In the preliminary analysis of Puerto Barrios altar, Mayer (1987: 29; 1991: 21) noted that it may be from the western Peten as well as from the Usumacinta River region, the Petexbatun area, and the Pasión River region. More detailed research was published in 1995 by Héctor Escobedo and Federico Fahsen with preliminary drawing by Edgar Ortega. The authors pointed out two key elements that could indicate a possible origin of the altar: the giant Ajaw sign that according to them was known only in the Eastern Maya region; and a similar style of depicting the portrait of a ruler as on Piedras Negras Throne 1 (Escobedo & Fahsen 1995: 92; 1996: 106). A recent study was presented in 2015 by Camilo Luín and colleagues who suggested connection to the polity of *Hix Witz* (Zapote Bobal) (Luín *et al.* 2016).

EPIGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

The monument is oval in shape, 1.50 m in length, 1.15 m in width with a height of 0.36 m. The top and a front side are carved with hieroglyphic inscription, counting in total 37 glyph-blocks (33 on the top and 4 on

the side) and a central “giant Ajaw” motif, representing a portrait of a ruler inside of a day sign 9 Ajaw (Figure 2). The text starts with a record of the Initial Series (A1-A4) 9.15.15.0.0 9 Ajaw 18 Xul (04.06.746), although the first two Long Count positions are eroded. The Initial Series Introductory Glyph includes a patron of the month in the form of the sky (CHAN) glyph that corresponds to the month Sek instead of recorded Xul. The logogram for 20-day month (B3) is complemented with *la* syllable (see discussion below). Strangely enough, the day of *tzolk'in* 9 Ajaw is repeated twice (B4 and E2). Supplementary Series (A5-B5) includes a reference to the Lord of the Night (G9) and Glyph F (TT'-HUN, 'u-ti'hu'n) written with a full form of the logogram TT', “mouth”. The Lunar Series comprises six blocks (C1-C4) and is written in its complete form (glyphs E, D, C, X, B and A). Day of the lunar month (Glyph E) is gone but could be reconstructed as 8-*ji-ya*, *waxakijiy*, “eight days since”.

Next section (C5-E1) records poorly understood “Fire Sequence”. Nikolai Grube noted that it always consists of three parts: (1) a verb/participle describing some action with fire, (2) the hieroglyph K'AK' (“fire”), and (3) the name of a god. He pointed out a correlation between different predicates and particular gods. On the altar the main sign of the predicate (C5) represents a hand looking down with a circular element between thumb and forefinger, possibly representing copal pellet (fig. 3a). This sign is attested in other regions (Figure 3b, c) and was tentatively read PUK? (“to scatter”) (Grube 2000: 95). According to Grube it was associated with Jaguar God of Underworld, but actually the deity is 'Ajan or Maize God. This is true for Puerto Barrios altar too, but 'AJAN logogram is followed by *wa* syllabic sign, probably indicating that the full name should be read LEM-'AJAN-'AJAW, *Lem 'Ajan 'Ajaw* (“Shining? Corn Lord”).

The calendrical part ends with the Calendar Round 9 Ajaw 18 Xul (E2-F2) and a reference to the final five-year period (*wi'-ho'tuun*), that shows a rare initial phonetic complement *wi* for the logogram WT' (F3).

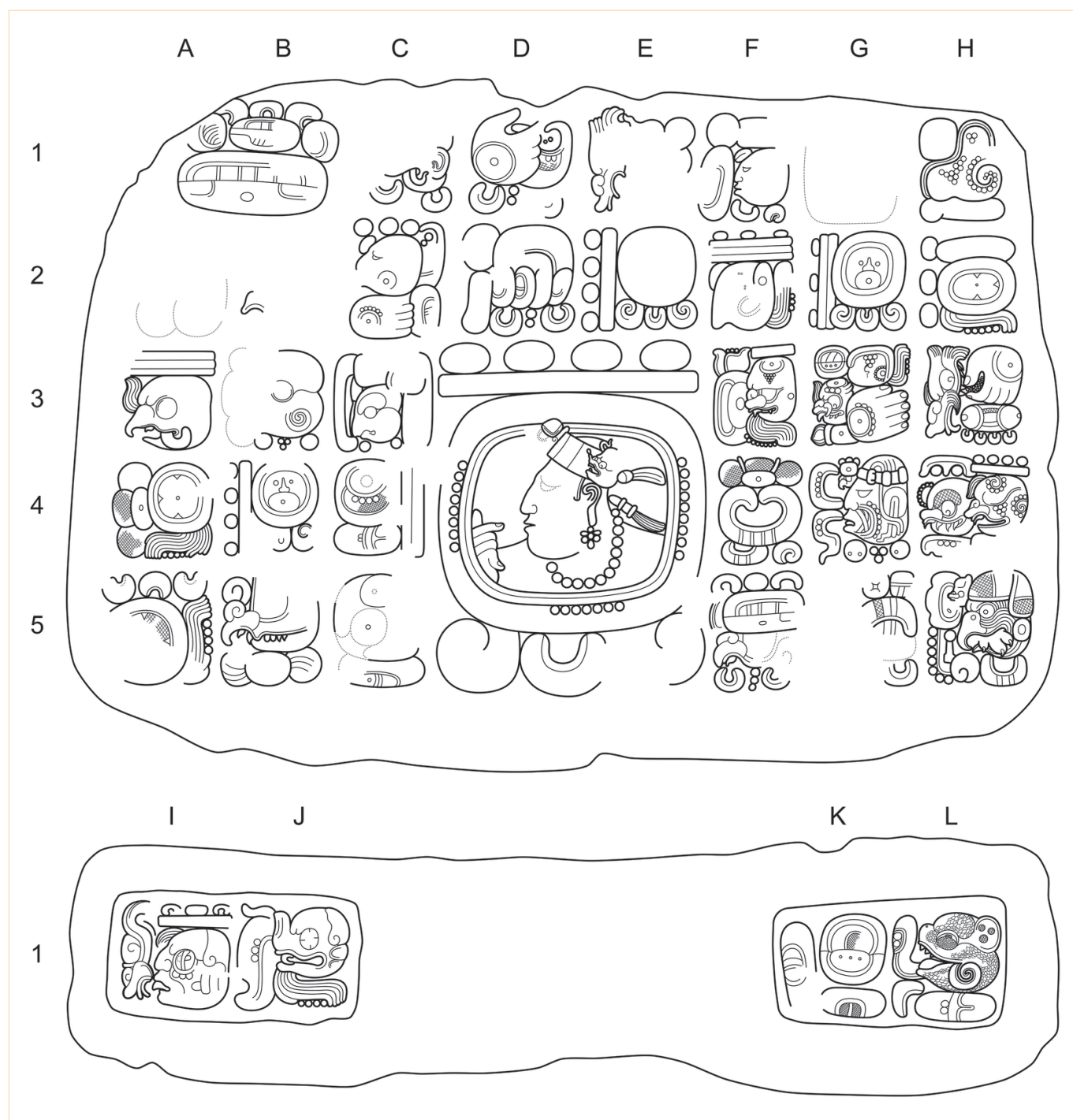


Figure 2. The inscription of Puerto Barrios altar (drawing by Philipp Galeev).

Contrary to the suggestion by Luín *et al.* (2016: 654), who reconstruct hypothetical date 9.15.16.0.0 (28.05.747), a distance number of one year (F4-F5) is counted backwards from the Initial Series to reach the Calendar Round 13 Ajaw 3 Yaxk'in in G2-H2 (9.15.14.0.0; 09.06.745). The verb in G1 is destroyed. The next block preserved a central **WITZ** logogram with an eroded sign in the upper left. The lower sign could be a syllable 'a that would give the locative ... *Witza'*

indicating some watery location like *Huux Witza'* (Caracol, Belize) (Stuart & Houston 1994: 28). However, while it mentioned a place name where the event occurred, the association with *Hix Witz* (Luín *et al.* 2016: 654) is doubtful. The second clause (G3-H5) is marked by the phrase *'i-ubti k'altuun*, "and then the stela-presenting happened". Stela dedication was evidently accompanied by the scattering ritual (*'u-CHOK-ko-ji*, *'u-chokooj*, "he scattered [copal]").

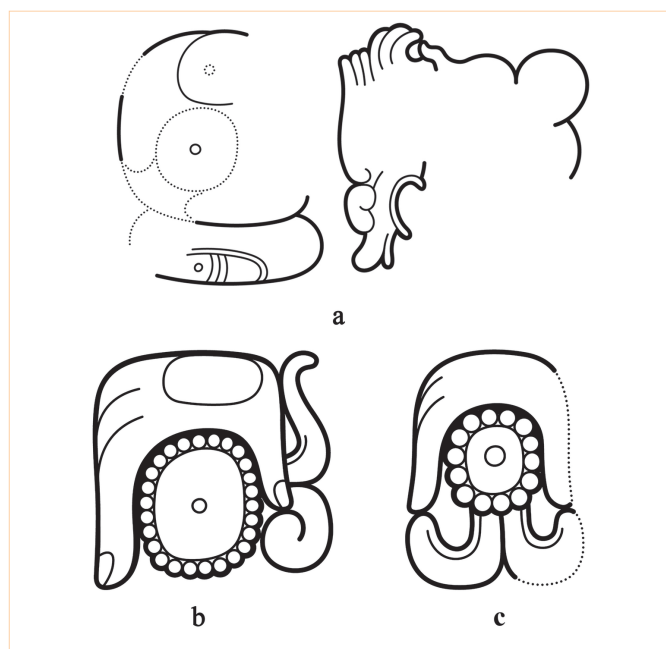


Figure 3. PUK? logogram: a) Puerto Barrios altar, C5; b) Polol Stela 4, pB1; c) Itsimte Stela 7, B3. Drawings by Philipp Galeev.

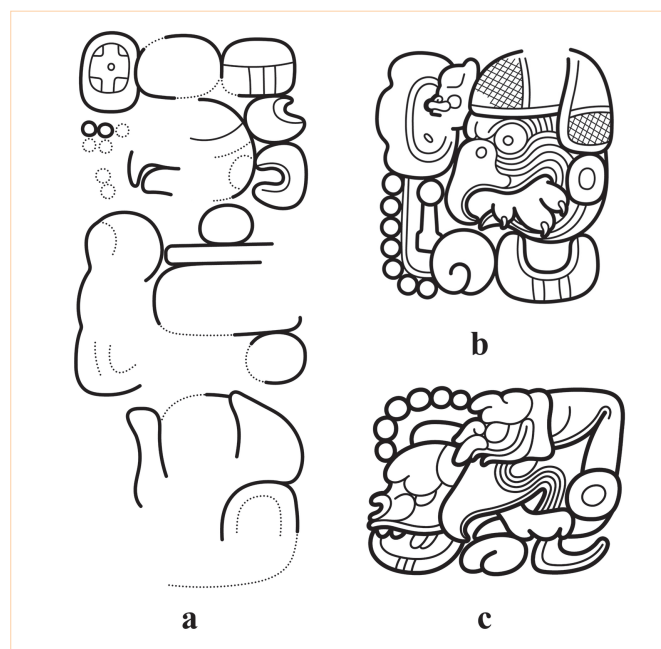


Figure 5. “Predatory Bird” Emblem Glyph: a) Itsimte Stela 3, pB1-pB3; b) Puerto Barrios altar, H5; c) Yaxchilan Lintel 46, I1. Drawings by Philipp Galeev.

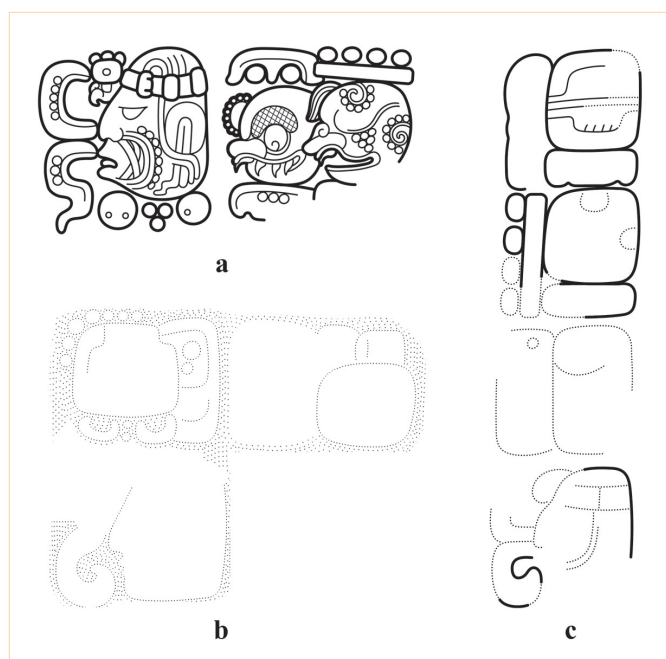


Figure 4. Nominal glyphs of the ruler *K'abk'...l*: a) Puerto Barrios altar, G4; b) Itsimte Stela 5, C2-C3; c) Itsimte Stela 5, G1-G4. Drawings by Philipp Galeev.

The name glyph of the protagonist (G4) consists of fire glyph **K'AK'** and unknown logogram—a human head with headband and cross element in the cheek—with probable phonetic complement **la**. Block H4 contains military title *'u-chan*, “the captor of”, followed by the captive’s name **9-TUN**, *Bolo'n Tuun* (Figure 4a).

The additional title in G5 is damaged but new photos helped to identify a logogram **PIT**, “palanquin” (Beliaev & Davletshin 2014). The missing left part probably contained a numeral, so we have another “numbered palanquin” title (like *wak-piit*, “six palanquins”, at El Palmar or *chan-piit*, “four palanquins”, at Sacul). The most interesting moment is the unusual Emblem Glyph (H5): a head of a predatory bird with animal paw in its beak conflated with logogram **'AJAW** represented by a royal headband (see discussion below).

The inscription continues with four blocks on the edge. It starts with the title *'u-wak-yo...n*, “the sixth ‘yok’in” (I1-J1). The title **yo-T765c-ni** is still undeciphered: several readings were suggested, but the most popular is *yok'in* (Boot 2005: 353). The final title (K1-L1) is unique and is read **LEM?-’i-li wi-WINIK-ki**, *lemil winik*, perhaps, “shining man”.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the text of Puerto Barrios altar permits separation of three traits that help to identify its provenance.

1. *The “giant Ajaw” glyph.* The overwhelming majority of “giant Ajaw” altars come from Caracol (14) and Tonina (about 10). However, they are also found at El Chorro, Quirigua, Itsimte and Tikal.

2. *The Fire Sequence.* This formula is concentrated in three regions: Belize (Caracol, La Milpa, Mountain Cow, Nim Li Punit, Pusilha, Xnaheb Ahse Enel), the eastern Peten (Ixkun, Ixtutz, Naranjo, Sacul, Yaxha) and the central Peten (Itsimte, Motul de San José, Polol). There are also some examples from other regions (Calakmul, Ek Balam, Itzan, Naachtun, Palenque, Río Azul, Yaxchilan).

3. *The phonetic complement la for the logogram of the month in the Long Count.* Its use probably marks that the word for 20-day month was not *winik*, but *winal* (Lacadena & Wichmann 2002: 291-293). Such examples are rare, mostly coming from the Petexbatun region (Aguateca, Dos Pilas, Machaquila) and the Motagua region (Copán, Quirigua), but also are found in Caracol, Itsimte and Naranjo.

Among the Late Classic Maya sites in Guatemala all three traits are typical of Itsimte (Itsimte-Sacluk). The monuments from Itsimte were redocumented in 2013 and 2016 and analyzed in 2017–2018 (Beliaev & Vepretskii 2018). Stela 5 (9.15.0.0.0 4 Ajaw 13 Yax; 731) contained the birth date (9.13.11.15.0 4 Ajaw 13 Kankin; 17.11.703) of the ruler whose name glyph (D2-C3) is eroded but ended with a human head prefixed by a fire sign K'AK' (Figure 4b). Secondary text on the front (Figure 4c) begins with 'u-*chan*, "his captor", followed by the eroded block containing number "9". Review of new photos of the monument confirmed our previous suggestion (*ibid.*: 11) that the final block consisted of fire sign in front of a human head with headband. Since the same name glyph appears on Puerto Barrios altar, both monuments were dedicated by one ruler (K'AK'-...-la, K'ahk'...l) whose military title was 'u-*chan Bolo'n Tuun*, "the captor of Bolon Tuun".

No clear Emblem Glyph is associated with K'ahk'...l on Itsimte monuments. The only possible version comes from Stela 3 dated to 9.16.0.0.0 2 Ajaw 13 Sek (09.05.751) (Morley 1938: 391). In the lower part of the front side there are three hieroglyphic blocks (fig. 5a). The first one (pB1) is evidently Emblem Glyph

with a bird head as the main sign. This form does not appear anywhere else in Itsimte but looks like the Emblem Glyph from Puerto Barrios altar (fig. 5b). One more example of the same Emblem Glyph is attested in a carver's signature on Yaxchilan Lintel 46 dated to 713. The sculptor is called *y-anabil*, "the instrument of" *Jomal Chaahk*, the holy lord wearing "Predatory Bird" Emblem Glyph (fig. 5c). The final clause of Stela 3 (pB2-pB3) confirms its association with K'ahk'...l. The first block starts with syllable 'u and number "6" above the oval main sign and the affix looking like la syllable. The second preserved zoomorphic head looking similar to a bat with possible K'IN element in the cheek. The prefixed sign is destroyed, but could be a syllable yo. All the passage can be reconstructed as 'u-*wak-tal yo...n*, "the sixth 'yok'in" and is identical to the title on the side of Puerto Barrios altar.

The identification of K'ahk'...l as sixth 'yok'in' seems to contradict our previous identification of the dynastic count on Itsimte Stela 7 (Beliaev & Vepretskii 2018: 7). However, this poorly understood title could refer to some alternative hierarchy within the Classic Maya polities.

CONCLUSION

Given all the above, the best candidate for the origin of Puerto Barrios altar is the Itsimte area. The monument was set by a local king K'ahk'...l, otherwise known from Stela 5. He was born in 703 and acceded between 713 and 731. His captive *Bolo'n Tuun* who also appears on Stela 5 should be captured in unknown pre-accession campaign before 731. Stela 3 (751) mentions the titles of K'ahk'...l and shows that he governed for more than 20 years. The use of the "Predatory Bird" Emblem Glyph distinct from the usual Emblem Glyph raises the possibility that, in the 8th century, Itsimte rulers created a multi-center polity that could contribute to the Late Classic splendor of this site.

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