*Erratum: The publisher has incorrectly transposed Figures 4 and 5.

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Contributions

Confederate Curio: A Wooden Carving from Tikal, Guatemala

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For George Stuart

In 1907, “a piece of rosewood with human face carved in profile” (Cat. No. 247221) entered the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (Smithsonian Institution 1907). Close examination of the piece in 2014 (Fig. 1) confirms that this object is a hitherto unknown fragment of a wooden lintel mounted over one of the temple doorways at the Maya city of Tikal, Guatemala. The condition and dimensions of the fragment, the timing of its departure from Guatemala, and the style of the carving indicate that this fragment came from one of two likely places: (1) a missing portion of Lintel 2 from the central inner doorway of Temple II; or (2) the missing beam “d” of Lintel 3 from Temple I. Temple II Lintel 2 is known only from two slabs photographed in the early 20th century by Teobert Maler; one of those slabs is now at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Temple I Lintel 3 is split between the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, Switzerland, and the British Museum. If from Temple II Lintel 2, the human face could likely be a portrait of Jasaw Chan (or Kan) K’awiil, a.k.a. “Ruler A,” who ruled Tikal from ca. AD 682–734. If from the missing portion of Temple I Lintel 3, the face may represent a piece of a throne or back-rack.

A Confederate Collects

There is a certain irony that the slab now resides in the Smithsonian, a Federal collection of the US government. Its donor, Leonard A. Wailes (1838–1926), was a Confederate officer during the US Civil War and, in his earlier years, no friend to Washington, DC. Wailes came of unusual stock (Fig. 2). His father and grandfather were ardent naturalists and friends of John James Audubon, who executed their portraits in pencil and on painted ivory (Dockery 2009:Figs. 4–6; Syndor 1938:128–130). Originally from Adams County, Mississippi, Wailes himself served in the Mississippi Cavalry, participating in the ferocious Battle of Shiloh in 1862. Prior to the war, he had trained as a physician at Philadelphia’s Jefferson Medical College and was assigned towards the end of the conflict to the Medical Corps in Alexandria, Louisiana (Confederate Veteran 1926:187; Dockery 2009:17; Guice 2010). Wailes settled in New Orleans, Louisiana after the war (Confederate Veteran 1926:187; Times-Picayune 1926:2). By the final decade of the 19th century, when he was well into his 50s, Wailes took on a new role as founding physician of the Louisiana Leper Home. One account hints at his resolute nature. He appears to have been one of the few members of its staff, at times working as sole “doctor, nurse, priest, and servant” of what must have been a highly distressed set of patients (Blondheim 1958:19; Duffy 1962:452).

A few years later, Wailes, now in his 60s, reported to Central America as resident medical officer for the Louisiana State Board of Health (Medical News Items 1907:755; Public Health Reports 1904:1299). From Livingston, Guatemala, Puerto Cortés, Honduras, and Limón, Costa Rica, Wailes monitored outbreaks of yellow fever. Such news was of pressing concern to New Orleans, the main port of the United Fruit Company – mosquito-borne disease might easily accompany its cargo of bananas from Central America to the United States. Wailes was in place to see that this did not happen. His final years were spent in part as an amateur historian of his Civil War regiment, in nostalgic recollection of battles fought almost 60 years before (e.g., Wailes 1916a; 1916b; 1920; 1922a; 1922b). He also patented, at the age of 85, a “Self-Registering Scale for Fishing Rods” (Patent US1458014 A, 1923).

Fig. 1. (a) Photograph of the Wailes Fragment by James Doyle. (b) Drawing of the Wailes Fragment by Stephen D. Houston. (c) Detail of the mutilation on the Wailes Fragment by Stephen D. Houston.

Fig. 2. Daguerreotype of B. L. C. Wailes and Dr. Leonard A. Wailes, ca. 1850. Photograph by David Dockery.
Fully consistent with family tradition, Wailes acquired many curiosities during his travels, gifting them to the Smithsonian in several installments (Smithsonian Institution 1905; 1906; 1907; 1909). These include, by year: 1905 ("Mammal, reptiles, and seeds of plants; fossil shell, Cypaea mus, variety bicornis Sowerby"), 1906 ("Port Limon, Costa Rica: Marl containing Tertiary fossils; fossil and mound shells, and skull of an agouti"), 1907 ("Skull of Agouti paca; pottery fragments and stone and pottery objects from Central America"), and 1909 ("Hercules beetle, Megalosoma elephas, and a ‘rear horse’ or ‘praying mantis,’ Chaeradodis, from Guatemala").

The Wailes gift of 1907 drew special attention from the Board of Trustees of the Smithsonian (Smithsonian Institution 1907:21; our emphasis):

“One of the most important donations in prehistoric archaeology was received from Dr. L. A. Wailes, of New Orleans, Louisiana. The collection came from Central and South America and may be briefly described as follows: From the Peten district in Guatemala small baked clay heads representing various types of physiognomy and head gear, fragments of large earthenware vases, mainly ornamental parts showing the human face; portions of figures of vases with hands, arms, feet, and legs, modeled in the round, the feet showing sandals and the method of attachment; other fragments representing animal forms, apparently finished in a kind of glaze; pottery whistles, a clay spindle whorl, a small polished stone chisel, and a piece of rosewood with a human face carved in profile. From Costa Rica, small carved-stone images, earthenware vases (mainly tripods), and a pottery whistle representing a toad. From Chiriqui, Panama, earthenware vessels and polished stone hatchets, the latter begin characteristic of that locality, hexagonal in section with beveled surfaces; a polished stone hatchet from Mexico, an obsidian knife from Honduras, and a pottery bowl of black polished ware, with four animal figures grouped about the rim, from Venezuela.”

The woodcarving, said explicitly to come from the Peten, remains to this day in the archaeology collections of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (A247221-0). The donation was likely motivated by the construction of the Museum’s current home between 1904 and 1911, and perhaps by Wailes’ wish to house his varied collection in a nationally prominent repository (National Museum of Natural History). It is uncertain, however, why the carving drifted into oblivion. One reason may be staffing. In 1920 William Henry Holmes, originally appointed as curator of “Aboriginal Ceramics,” left for the embryonic National Gallery of Art. Thereafter, the Museum tended to focus more on field research than direct study of their Mesoamerican holdings.

“A Piece of Rosewood”

The Wailes fragment measures 27.5 cm in height, with the width varying from 5 cm at the lower end to 6 cm at the upper end, and 7.5 cm at the widest point of the nose (see Fig. 1). The depth of the fragment is highly variable, ranging from 3.3 cm at the thinnest point, to 4.5 cm at the thickest. The object, weighing 302 g, depicts a Late Classic Maya (ca. AD 700) figure in profile in a very dense wood, that of the sapodilla or chicozapote tree (Manilkara zapota).

The fragment came from a far larger beam, its grain running along its length. That slab had eroded in part, isolating the fragment and leading to its degradation near the chin of the face. At some point, the fragment seems to have been pierced and split from the wood, probably during extraction; these breaks still appear surprisingly fresh, marking two lateral sides, just under the nose and next to the eye. The upper portion of the piece was hacked out with at least four or five strikes of a metal blade, probably a hatchet or machete. The mouth of the figure has suffered damage from at least three (and probably more) blows from a different blade, significantly pre-dating the extraction blows, probably evidence of an act of ritual mutilation typical of Maya monuments (Just 2005; Mesick 2006). Three blows cut in sharply, dislodging vertical chunks of wood; smaller marks, no more than thin slices, lightly incised the surface (see Fig. 1c). A robust blow may also have taken off the ala and bottom half of the nose. The angle of the blows from upper left to lower right hints that the axe-wielder was right-handed. There is some pitting, almost crescentic in shape, on the bridge of the nose and under the eye, about seven instances in total. This damage is probably ancient as well, but would have involved a chisel or gouge rather than a chert axe. The figure wore a headdress, the beaded headband of which is just barely visible, covering a fringe of hair cropped short over the forehead. There is a bored drill hole on the upper reverse side, presumably created post-extraction for the purposes of hanging or mounting. This hole pierced the front and split the wood slightly near the top of the head, by the fringed hair. Other than the intentional marks, the wood is in remarkable condition.

Fig. 3. Comparison of profile portraits on Tikal wooden lintels. Drawing by James Doyle after Jones and Satterthwaite 1982.

Fig. 4. Copy of Eusebio Lara’s drawing of Tikal Temple I, Lintel 3. Object 29.1 in the Eastern Antiquities collection of the Society of Antiquaries of London, UK, courtesy of the Society.
state of preservation, with little damage from humidity or temperature-related splitting.

Based on our knowledge of extant wooden fragments from other sites, the dimensions of the Wailes fragment, and the style of the carving, we argue that this fragment came from one of Tikal’s wooden lintels. The high forehead, prominent nose, pendant eye with incised round pupil, and half-open mouth of this portrait are all consistent with late seventh and early eighth century Late Classic depictions of rulers at Tikal. Comparative portraits come from both Temple I and II lintels, likely contemporary with the fragment, as well as slightly later portraits from Temple IV and Temple III, part of the same tradition of Tikal woodcarving (Fig. 3).

**Lintels that Leave**

Wooden objects of Classic Maya origin are extremely rare, with just a handful of surviving examples in both portable objects and architectural sculpture. Carved lintels are known from Tikal and El Zotz in Peten, Guatemala, Dzibanche in Quintana Roo, and sites in the northern Yucatan such as Chichen Itza, Kabah, and Uxmal (e.g., Stephens 1962[1843]: 117, Pl. 25). The example from the House of the Governor at Uxmal is especially lamentable. Embellished with a long text that was never drawn, it was featured by Frederick Catherwood in a display that went up in flames on July 31, 1842 (see the foreword by Wolfgang von Hagen in Stephens 1962[1843]:xvii–xviii). Another purported lintel appeared in the Barbachano Ponce Collection and was written up by Flora Clancy, but is a crude fake that “quotes,” in reversed orientation, Lintel 2 from Temple IV at Tikal (Gallenkamp and Johnson 1985:Pl. 74). Portable wooden objects are equally few, limited to examples like those in, among other holdings, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1979.206.1063), the Berlin Museum (y1974-8 and y1990-71), and the Library of Congress (Tortuguero Box, Jay I. Kisslak Collection).

The earliest known wooden lintel, now at the Museo Nacional in Guatemala City, came from the site of El Zotz, stylistically dated to the early AD 500s; those at Dzibanche are slightly later, from AD 554. But it is Tikal, Guatemala, where such lintels abound (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: 97–105, figs. 69–75). Two come from Temple I, at least one from Temple II, one, perhaps two, from Temple III, two from Temple IV, and a final example from Structure 10 (5D-52). The last is distinct in that it was found, not in a pyramidal temple, but spanning a doorway in the royal palace or Central Acropolis. Notably, all occur on buildings in more-or-less East-West transect across the site, in rough chronological order of the temple’s construction: Temple I and Temple II (ca. AD 695–730), Temple IV (ca. AD 740–750), then Temple III (ca. AD 780–810). The Tikal lintels were first reported by Rit­ter (1853), Rosny (1882), and Maudslay (1889–1902). In fact, Maudslay (1883:204), impressed by the preservation of the wood, felt that the very existence of the lintels “showed that it was not necessary to consider the temples to be older than about three centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards.”

Fragments from Tikal are now spread across several collections in Guatemala, the United States, and Europe, including the British Museum, the Museum der Kulturen Basel (formerly the Museum für Völkerkunde), the American Museum of Natural History, and now the Smithsonian Institution of Washington. Recent research has corroborated the hieroglyphic evidence of a late seventh-early eighth-century date for the wooden lintels, including a cal. AD 658–696 date for the production of Lintel 3 from Temple I (Kennett et al. 2013).

The earliest lintel beams to depart Guatemala were the two Temple I, Lintel 3, fragments that were purchased in 1875 in Flores; these are now in the British Museum (Coe, Shook, and Satterthwaite 1961:21). The majority of the carved beams were acquired by Carl Gustav Bernoulli, son of an apothecary in Basel and member of a distinguished family of Swiss mathematicians—to whom we owe Bernoulli numbers, polynomials, and differential equations. Inspired by an aged Alexander von Humboldt, who urged the young botanist to visit Guatemala, Bernoulli duly traveled to that distant country, established several pharmacies, bought a coffee plantation, and collected, from 1858 on, a large sample of pressed plants (JSTOR). The segment of his journeys that interests us, however, was a trip in 1877, when Bernoulli visited Tikal and “prepared a contract so that well-preserved pieces [of several carved lintels] could be sent to Coban.” Bernoulli doubted how quickly this would be done—in one letter, very much of its time, he attributed to local inhabitants an “unprecedented laziness that has to be seen to be believed” (Meyer-Holdampf 2002-2003:74). In any case, Bernoulli did not make it back. Within a short time, he was dead, expiring in San Francisco.

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*Fig. 5. Tikal graffito of jaguar palanquin and profile portrait back­rack. Drawing by Stephen D. Houston after Trik and Kampen 1983: Fig. 71.*
Fig. 6. Hypothetical placement of the Wailes Fragment on Tikal Temple I, Lintel 3.
Original drawing by William Coe; addition by Stephen D. Houston.
Courtesy of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania.
of "phthisis," probably tubercular pneumonia, on his return trip to Switzerland (Meyer-Holdamp 2002-2003:73); Maler (1911:42), in a biographical sketch, had mentioned Bernoulli's "weak lungs" and "fear he would not be equal to the difficulties of the journey." By 1879, the lintel fragments had found their way into the ethnographic museum of Basel, which allowed the great Orientalist Léon de Rosny to photograph and publish them in 1882 (Rosny 1882: 40–41, Plates 8–12). Herbert Spinden brought three additional beams to New York in 1914. The remaining fragments stayed in situ or in storage at Tikal.

Maler (1911:43) gives some insight into the process of removing the beams:

"The Indians, by the way, when they pulled out the carved beams from the temples of Tikal, at the instance of the art connoisseurs, adopted the reprehensible method of burning off both ends, in order to save their machetes. As this process is a rather slow one, they frequently leave the beam burning while they go to their meals or drink their potosol, and are quite undisturbed if a pair of sacerdotal feet, the plume of a helmet, or some interesting hieroglyphs are consumed during their absence. (The half-charred beam which I pulled out from under a heap of debri{s in Great Temple II is an incontrovertible proof of my assertion.) These people do not know the use of saws, and it is very difficult to cut the exceedingly hard tsapoli wood with a machete. But since these beams with the ends burned off and the backs cut away are still very heavy to carry, and also because the Indians frequently see very little of the large sums expended for such work, they generally end by leaving one or two beams in the temple or throwing them away on the road, as the Indians themselves have very complaisantly told me!"

The Wailes fragment hails from the Peten, as noted upon its accession, yet it does not belong securely to any of the known carved beams at Tikal. All surviving human profiles that face to the figure's right are accounted for, even eroded ones, like that of the dwarf to lower right on Temple I, Lintel 3—his eye has a full pupil and can thus be eliminated as a candidate. Nor does it accord with the Structure 10 lintel in the American Museum of Natural History (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:figs. 70, 75). According to Coe, Shook, and Satterthwaite (1961:22–23), a number of carved beams were missing when they prepared their meticulous survey: Temple I, Lintel 3, beam d, and three beams of Temple II, Lintel 2. A completely unknown lintel could have provided the Smithsonian fragment—there is a chance that now-disappeared, carved lintels existed in Temples III and IV. But it appears more likely that either Temple I or Temple II was the Wailes fragment's original home.

Both are strong candidates. The beam of Temple I, Lintel 3, that did not get purchased in Flores may have been left in situ or proved too damaged for removal. The reduced fragment as seen today could have made its way to Flores or Belize and eventually to Wailes in Livingston. (It seems doubtful that the doctor ever made his way to Tikal, a difficult journey for someone of his age). Simon Martin (pers. comm. 2014) encouraged us to consider the scale of the head in the Smithsonian fragment. At approximately 27 cm, the head appears to be slightly larger than the face of the woman in the missing fragment of Temple II Lintel II, another candidate for our fragment (see below). It is also slightly larger than the ruler's profile in Temple I, Lintel 3. Perhaps, as Martin suggests, the missing beam of Tikal Temple I, Lintel 3, held the head and back-rack of the jaguar palanquin effigy, the costume of the seated Jasaw Chan K'awil, and the rear portion of the throne and palanquin platform pictured in beams b and c (See Figure 3). As Martin points out, the original engravings published by Ritter (1853:Taf. 1), based in turn on drawings by Eusebio Lara in 1853 (Fig. 4), show what purports to be this lintel scene, with a large, crowned head floating behind the seated ruler (Coe, Shook, and Satterthwaite 1961: Fig 21a; Hammond 1984: Pl. XXIIa). Plausibly, then, if the ruler's (or effigy's) costume or throne held a portrait mask element facing the viewer's left in beam d, the Wailes fragment could represent the face that Lara noted in his sketch. In the drawing, the artist represented a similar line of hair protruding onto the forehead of the disembodied head, suggesting a possible likeness of the face in the newly identified fragment. Another jaguar palanquin, on Piedras Negras Stela 10, displays a comparable face as a back ornament (David Stuart, personal communication, 2014; Stuart and Graham 2003:55).

Yet there are two possible challenges: first, the scale of Lara's drawing is unreliable, as it records the dwarf at the same size as the ruler; and second, several of the other original drawings show floating heads with crowns, suggesting that the face on the Wailes fragment may not actually represent a human visage (see Hammond 1984: Pl. XXc, Pl. XXVb, Pl. XXVIc). Martin also pointed us to further evidence of an anthropomorphic element to the effigy's decoration in a graffito of a jaguar palanquin from Tikal Structure 5D-65 (Fig. 5; Trik and Kampen 1983:Fig. 71). At least one other graffito contains a profile face as part of its back-rack, although other representations of a similar jaguar palanquin do not record the face element (Trik and Kampen 1983:Fig. 72). Still, and very much in favor of Martin's suggestion, these effigies could have worn removable jewelry or other accoutrements. If so, the face on the Wailes fragment could represent such a feature as a part of an effigy's back-rack (Fig. 6).

The second possibility is Temple II, Lintel 2. The three missing beams might have been removed after Maudslay's visit in the 1880s, when they appeared to have been in situ, and before Maler's visit in 1904. Coe et al. (1961:35) argued that the figure on the extant beams of Temple II Lintel 2 would have been the central figure of the composition. But Spinden (1913:257), who removed the only surviving fragment, had another interpretation, namely that the two beams photographed by Maler came from the right side of the composition. This alternative leaves sufficient room for a missing person in profile possibly represented by the Smithsonian fragment. In this case, the figure could have been Jasaw Chan K'awil, the likely builder of Temple II, paired with his wife or mother, who is presumably depicted on the known beams (Coggins 1975:549–550). Male-female pairing on lintel sculpture and monuments, albeit with couples facing each other, was common during the Late Classic at many other sites, such as Yaxchilan, Piedras Negras, and Calakmul.

A Recovered Prize

Wooden carvings are among the rarest of Maya finds. This was not for want of production—such objects do occur archaeologically but in unusual, water-logged conditions, as at
Cancuen and Chichen Itza, or in exceptionally dry settings like those at Rio Azul or southern Belize (e.g., Coggins 1992). Finding such a sculpture is worthy of note, especially when one comes to light in a prominent public collection, with a date of acquisition over a century ago. The most probable conclusion from contextual clues is that the Smithsonian fragment came from one of two sources, Tikal Temple II, Lintel 2 or Temple I, Lintel 3. The former possibility hints at a far more elaborate composition for Temple II, Lintel 2 than previously supposed, with more than one figure, not just a royal female. This reconstruction would recast Temple II as a building focused, perhaps, on a royal couple. If facing left, in an orientation of high honor (see Palka 2002), the personage on the Wailes fragment was most likely a Tikal ruler, probably Jasaw Chan (Kan) K’awiil. The latter possible reconstruction, 2 or Temple I, Lintel 2 vestige. But not all is glum surmise. If the Smithsonian fragment was most likely a Tikal ruler, probably Jasaw Chan (Kan) K’awiil. The latter possible reconstruction, 2 or Temple I, Lintel 2 vestige. But not all is glum surmise. If the Smithsonian fragment was most likely a Tikal ruler, probably Jasaw Chan (Kan) K’awiil. The latter possible reconstruction, 2 or Temple I, Lintel 2 than previously supposed, with more than one figure, not just a royal female. This reconstruction would recast Temple II as a building focused, perhaps, on a royal couple. If facing left, in an orientation of high honor (see Palka 2002), the personage on the Wailes fragment was most likely a Tikal ruler, probably Jasaw Chan (Kan) K’awiil.

Acknowledgments

Simon Martin was most helpful with his suggestions about the Temple I, Lintel 3 beam; David Stuart, too, recalled us to a comparable image from Piedras Negras. Special thanks go to Rae Beaubien of the Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute for the invitation to participate in the workshop “Preventing Illicit Trafficking, Protecting Cultural Heritage” at the Museum Support Center on March 13, 2014. We are also grateful for the collections acumen of Jim Krakker who helped locate the fragment among the vast holdings of the National Museum of Natural History and provided data on the weight. Alan Doyle and Knox Martin contributed background information on Dr. L. A. Wailes. Thanks to David Dockery who put us in touch with the descendants of B. L. C. Wailes, Neal Wailes of Florence, Mississippi, and R. Preston Wailes of New Orleans, Louisiana.

Note

(1) It is possible that such carved lintels were more common: many eight-century buildings at Piedras Negras had doorways spanned by wooden lintels, now entirely gone, with disastrous consequences for the stability of their masonry vaults. The profusion of carved lintels at Yaxchilan leads to the suspicion that Piedras Negras had an equal number, but of perishable material.

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From June 2003 to December 2004, the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance (BVAR) conducted an archaeological mitigation in the Macal, Upper Macal, and Raspaculo River Valleys in western Belize (Awe et al. 2005). The area investigated by BVAR included the entire landmass that would be affected by the construction of the Macal River Upstream Storage Facility, known locally as the Chalillo Dam. During the course of investigations, archaeologists recorded a number of small sites, including El Chiquero, where they discovered a large chert bar. This macrolith now represents the largest known chipped stone artifact reported to date in Belize.

The El Chiquero Macrolith

The macrolith was found at the small site of El Chiquero, near the sites of Ramonal and Rubber Camp, in the Upper Macal River Valley (Fig. 1). In relation to better known archaeological sites, El Chiquero is located 18 km northeast of Caracol and approximately 33 km south of Cahal Pech. Specifically, the El Chiquero macrolith was recovered at the summit of Structure 210, a 4.1-meter tall pyramidal shrine structure built on the south end of a long, L-shaped platform (Awe et al. 2005: 84) (Fig. 2). It was found near the surface under the humus layer, which suggests that it may have originally been erected on top of the structure as a small stela-like monolith, or may have originally been deposited in the terminal construction of the structure itself.

This artifact is essentially a very large biface with one rounded end. It measures 96.5 cm long, 15.5 cm wide and 6.5 cm thick (Fig. 3a) and weighs 13.05 kg. It is nearly complete, with one end broken off, and was snapped into two halves at some point in the past. Somewhat fortuitously, since the exterior surface is almost completely covered in a white patina, the break at the approximate longitudinal mid-line of the artifact exhibits the original color and texture of the raw material. The chert is very fine-grained and is banded grayish-brown. Visually, it looks extremely similar to some of the cherts from the 'chert-bearing zone' of Northern Belize (Hunter and Shaffer 1984; Shaffer and Hester 1983).

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The Macrolith of El Chiquero, Belize

W. James Stemp, Jaime J. Awe and Christophe Helmke

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