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Ch'akah U Tz'ibal: The Axing of History at Seibal

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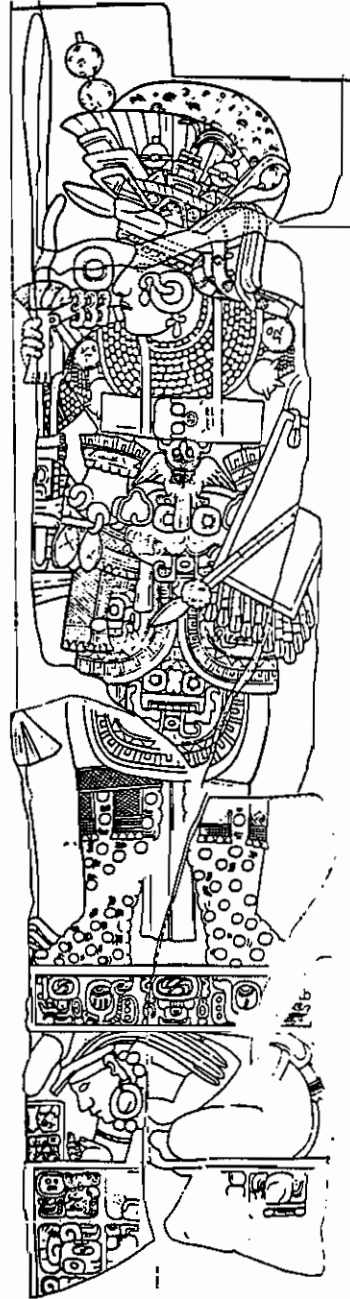
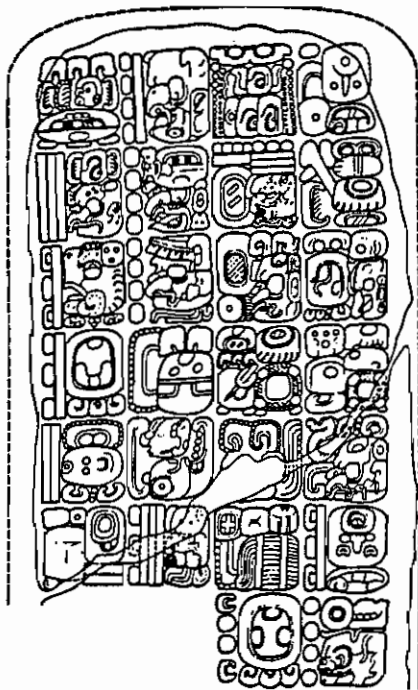
In the context of "star-shell" war events, the action undertaken by Dos Pilas and Aguateca against Seibal on 9.15.4.6.4 (AD 735) is well known. This war event is documented on Aguateca Stela 2 and on Dos Pilas Stela 16 (Figs. 1, 2), which depict Dos Pilas Ruler 3, in full "Tlaloc-warfare" regalia, standing over a captured Seibal ahaw. Although other Seibal ahawob continued to enact rituals at Seibal after this defeat, they did so primarily under the auspices of members of the Dos Pilas/Aguateca dynasty. In fact, this dynasty controlled the erection of monuments, as well as their content, for over sixty years after their victory against Seibal.

Carved in the Dos Pilas style (Mathews and Willey 1991:50), the text of the Seibal Hieroglyphic Stairs (dedicated on 9.16.0.0.0, AD 751), is mostly preserved. It records the bloodletting

and dedication events of several Seibal ahawob (primarily "Ich'ak Balam" or Claw Jaguar); however, it clearly states that he acted "yichnal" or "in the company of" Dos Pilas Ruler 4 ("K'awil Chaan Mak'ina"). The text also shows that this Dos Pilas ahaw "scattered" several times on his own. And Seibal Stelae 5, 6 and 7 (9.17.0.0.0-9.18.10.0.0, AD 771-800) document the next Seibal ruler (Mathews's and Willey's [1991] "Ruler D"), who does not use the Seibal Emblem Glyph, who is apparently part of the Dos Pilas/Aguateca dynasty, and who is also mentioned in texts at Chapayal and La Amelia (Mathews and Willey 1991:51), sites under Dos Pilas' control.

The Hieroglyphic Stairs, with an Initial Series Long Count date of 9.15.13.13.0 (ca. AD 744), constitute the earliest surviving carved text from Seibal. However, it seems likely that, prior to the

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Figures 1. Dos Pilas Stela 16 (Drawing by Ian Graham 1967)

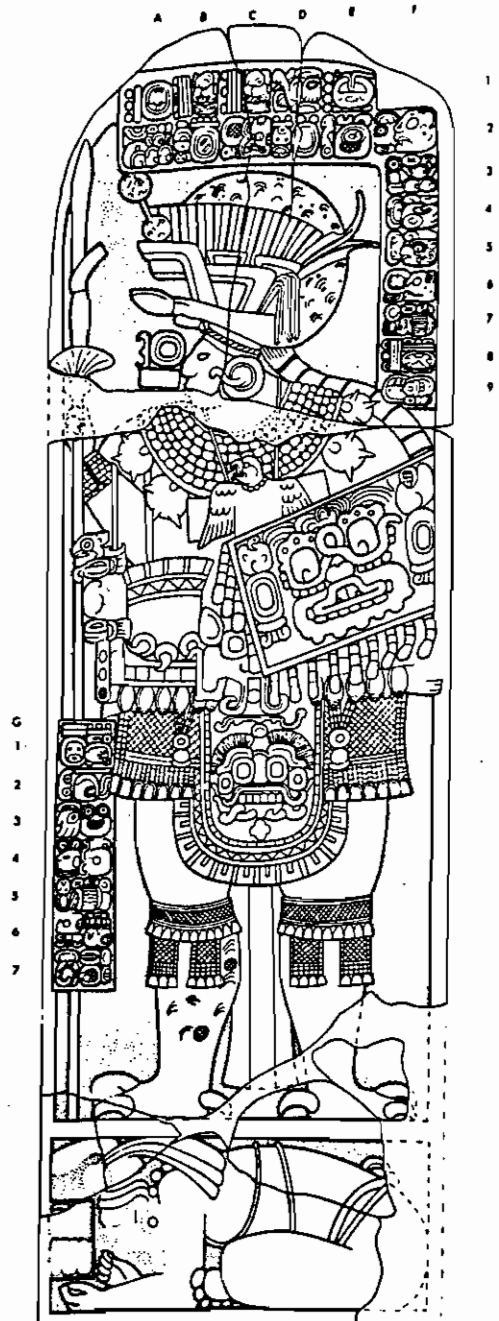


Figure 2. Aguateca Stela 2 (Drawing by Ian Graham 1967)

site's defeat on 9.15.4.6.4, Seibal lords would have indeed erected monuments, as was usual for most sites in the region. Although Seibal was only sparsely occupied for most of the Early Classic, its population increased steadily from about AD 650 onward (Smith 1982:6), and some of the site's monumental architecture was probably built in this phase as well (Smith 1982:154). According to Houston (1993:110-11), a reference to Seibal at 9.14.10.0.0 (AD 721) occurs on Dos Pilas Stela 15. And certainly, at the time of the war event, Seibal had both an Emblem Glyph, and an ahaw to capture, suggesting that the site and its ruling dynasty were relatively well-established. Finally, at least two pots (Kerr No. 791; Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:Fig. 4:6) depict the "wayob" of Seibal lords, and may date to this period.

If the ahawob of Seibal indeed had erected carved monuments prior to the war with Dos Pilas, as would certainly be expected, what happened to them? I suggest that they were deliberately destroyed by the victorious alliance in an attempt both to humiliate the defeated site and to be able to create the site's further monumental record on a *tabula rasa*. Destruction of monuments as a part of warfare is not unknown in the Maya area; for example, Caracol seems to have likewise effaced Tikal's stelae after defeating that site in the mid 6th century AD (Schele and Freidel 1990:172-73).

The continued subordination of Seibal to the victors could certainly be accomplished much more easily if its prior written history no longer existed; and in fact, the first monument erected at Seibal after the site's defeat (the H.S.) includes a section which blatantly attempts to "create" a record (unfortunately now eroded) of the actions of a Seibal ahaw (ballplaying?) during the prior bak'tun, suggesting that the conquerors made good use of the now-blank historical slate. As this "Seibal ahaw"'s actions take place around AD 415 (8.19.0.0.0), and the archaeological and ceramic evidence suggest that the site was "totally deserted" from ca. AD 500-650 (Willey et al.

1975:41), it seems unlikely that this could be a true lineage ancestor of the later ahawob.

I further propose that this destruction of Seibal's written record was recorded by the victors on their own stelae. Dos Pilas Stela 16 (Fig. 1) begins with the Long Count 9.15.4.6.4 8 K'an 17 Muwan, and the "star-over-Seibal" glyph (at C1). One day later, on 9 Chikchan 18 Muwan, another action takes place, which can be read "ch'akah" or "it was axed" (Orejuel 1990; Schele and Mathews 1993:150), followed by the object, then the names of the victorious lords. This object (D2b) I believe reads "u-tz'i-ba-li" or "u tz'ibal". In the PSS "u tz'ib" is recognized as "his writing" (Schele 1992:161); here I suggest "u tz'ibal" likewise means "its writing", i.e., the writing of Seibal. This is supported by further linguistic evidence. Although one of the Aguateca caretakers, an Itza speaker, suggested to Linda Schele that this phrase might refer to "bravo" or "angriness" (Schele, personal communication 1994), "writing" seems a much better fit. In Yukatek (Andrews Heath de Z. 1978), "tz'ibal" glosses as "pintada cosa de colores." This meaning follows through in several other Mayan languages as well; for example, in Motul, "tz'ibal" is "escrito o escritura y la pintura" (Ciudad Real 1930), while in Tzotzil, "tz'iba" is "write" and "tz'ibahel" "writing" (Laughlin 1975). Thus, this phrase seems to read "was axed, its writing." On Aguateca Stela 2 (Fig. 2), the entire warfare phrase is essentially parallel (A1-C1), suggesting that the destruction of the Seibal monuments was indeed a noteworthy event.

The famous "star-over-Seibal" war event thus had as its outcome not only the capture and sacrifice of the ruling Seibal ahaw, and the imposition of political dominion over the defeated lineage, but also the destruction of Seibal's written record. The domination of the Dos Pilas/Aguateca dynasty over Seibal would continue for over sixty years, not just through installation of the former's own overlords at the vassal site, but through its control of the written record, allowing the victors to literally (re)write the history book.

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