



The Importance of La Corona¹

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In 2008, the Proyecto Regional Arqueológico La Corona (PRALC; directed by Marcello A. Canuto and Tomás Barrientos Q.) was established to coordinate archaeological research in the northwestern sector of the Guatemalan Peten. Centered at the site of La Corona (N17.52 W90.38), PRALC initiated the first long-term scientific research of both the site and the surrounding region. To a large extent, however, La Corona was well known long before PRALC began its investigations, since it was ultimately revealed to be the mysterious “Site Q.” As the origin of over two dozen hieroglyphic panels looted in the 1960s and attributed to the as-yet-unidentified “Site Q” (Mathews 1988; Mayer 1978, 1980, 1984, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1995; Schuster 1997), La Corona had become newsworthy before it was even located. The tantalizing snippets of texts beautifully preserved on its small monuments (now largely understood to be individual blocks of several different hieroglyphic stairways) referenced the Kaanal dynasty of Late Classic Calakmul in a way that suggested the ruling families of these two cities shared an especially close relationship (Freidel and Guenter 2003; Houston and Stuart 2001; Martin 2001; Ringle 1985; Schele and Grube 1994; Schele and Mathews 1991; Stuart and Houston 1994).

After several expeditions confirmed the existence of a site near the chiclero camp of “Lo Veremos” in the northern reaches of the Peten (Billy 2012), the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions (CMHI) organized an expedition, directed by Ian Graham and David Stuart, to this unknown site in 1997 (Graham 1997, 2002). This short expedition resulted in the naming of the site as “La Corona,” the mapping of its modest architectural core, and the recording of several hieroglyphically inscribed monuments.

The on-site hieroglyphic analysis of the

monuments led to the realization that these texts contained several terms not only common in, but also unique to the texts of Site Q (Stuart 2001). The locative term thought to be the ancient Maya name of Site Q (*sak nikte'*), the name of a Site Q ruler (Chak Ak'aach Yuk), titles characteristic of Site Q rulers (*sak wayis*), and references to Site Q's most important ally (Kaanal), were all present in the texts found at La Corona. Despite expressed doubts regarding the identification of La Corona as Site Q (Graham 2002), petrographic similarities between stone samples from a Site Q monument and from exemplars collected at the site of La Corona led Stuart (2001) to suggest that La Corona was Site Q.

Armed with this interpretation, a second scientific expedition to the site was organized in 2005 by the Proyecto Arqueológico El Perú-Waka', then directed by David Freidel and Héctor Escobedo. The expedition, led by Marcello Canuto, conducted five days of mapping, survey, and reconnaissance that resulted in a 3D map of the site's architectural core, the relocation and re-recording of its monuments, the mapping of several outlying sites and surrounding settlement, and the discovery of two in-situ hieroglyphic

¹ The *La Corona Notes* series will disseminate the latest results and interpretations resulting from research on the Classic Maya center of La Corona in northern Peten, Guatemala. In the spirit of the *Copan Notes*, this series is meant to produce short informal papers (ca. 500-1000 words) by project members. Considering the usual lag between discovery and publication, *La Corona Notes* will provide a venue to rapidly circulate ideas, decipherments, or discoveries deemed interesting and useful to a wider public. This series will publish new notes as they are produced and in no particular order. For questions or comments, please email us at: lacorona.project@gmail.com.

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panels (Canuto et al. 2005).

This latter find proved critical to confirm the identification of La Corona as Site Q. The style, size, and preservation of the two panels were identical to those of the Site Q corpus. Moreover, their texts included more references to known Site Q kings, to the titles typically assigned to them, to the site's ancient Maya name, and even to the Snake emblem glyph of the Kaanal dynasty. Other discoveries during this expedition were also consistent with this interpretation (Canuto et al. 2005; Guenter 2005).

With the identification now confirmed, it became clear that La Corona had been an unusual Classic Maya polity (Canuto and Barrientos Q. 2011). The large quantity and exquisite quality of its sculpted monuments were not typical of such a modestly sized and isolated site. Clearly, the Kaanal dynasty of Dzibanche and Calakmul had invested deeply in La Corona through multiple marriages, repeated ball game ceremonies, and frequent visitations, as well as the raising of La Corona princes at the Kaanal court.² In fact, La Corona rulers were granted the honorific title *sak wayis*, typical of Kaanal allies. Despite this "special relationship," no La Corona monument (discovered to date) identifies its rulers as "holy lords of Saknikte'"—that is, La Corona did not have an emblem glyph (Canuto and Barrientos Q. n.d.). So important was La Corona to Kaanal, that, despite their distance, the Saknikte' kings never strayed far from Kaanal's political interests.

Most models of Classic Maya political organization contemplate loose and short-lived integration among autonomous city-states, especially among those that were as distant from one another as Calakmul and La Corona (Adams 1990; Demarest 1992; Houston et al. 2003; Marcus 1973; Mathews 1991; Sharer and Golden 2004). However, the La Corona texts suggested the very opposite was true. The relationship between these two dynasties was more than a political alliance of mutual convenience. Why would the Kaanal dynasty invest so much in La Corona?

To account for the frequent interaction between the ruling houses of Kaanal and El Perú-Waka', Freidel et al. (2007) proposed the existence of a "royal road" connecting them. It seemed likely that La Corona would lie along such a route. Therefore, since its inception, PRALC began testing the hypothesis that the Kaanal dynasty's interest in La Corona was due to its location along a communication route that gave it access to the western and southern lowlands, including Late Classic allies such as Cancuen, the source of highland goods such as jade (Demarest et al. 2007).

First, PRALC developed a model for a

Calakmul–La Corona–Cancuen trading route. PRALC's least-cost path analysis calculated the least accumulative cost of travel between sites for each cell of a 90 m digital elevation model (DEM) derived from the SRTM remote sensor. Applying the hiker function developed by Tobler (1993), PRALC developed: (1) an anisotropic friction surface representing the time of foot travel between features (sites), and (2) a surface representing the most efficient direction of travel. Using the cost path tool in ArcGIS (ESRI, Inc.) on these surfaces, PRALC plotted routes with the least travel time between La Corona and Calakmul, as well as La Corona and Cancuen (for another such application in Maya archaeology, see Doyle et al. 2012).

The resulting paths (Figure 1) connected a series of important and known Kaanal allies in a linear pattern.³ From La Corona southward, the route passed by El Perú-Waka', Hix Witz, Polol, Dos Pilas/Ceibal, and Cancuen. From La Corona northward, the route passed through Uxul and then to Calakmul. Surprisingly, throughout almost the entire 200 km route from Cancuen to Calakmul, no site was farther than 30 km from the next one. The only exception was the leg between La Corona and Uxul that suspiciously measured roughly 60 kms. Considering that this area is poorly known, it is possible that there exists a yet-unrecorded site somewhere in between La Corona and Uxul.

The number and regular spacing of Kaanal-allied sites along this path suggest that it indeed represents an important communication and trade route used by the Kaanal kings to access people and resources along the western flank of their rival, Tikal. It is worth noting that, as in the case of the famous "Silk Road," this royal Kaanal road is currently best understood as a route and not necessarily a formally constructed road.

Even if PRALC fails to find physical evidence of causeways in the indicated areas, the existence

² The Kaanal dynasty, seated at Dzibanche in the Early Classic (Velásquez García 2004, 2008), was shifted in the Late Classic to Calakmul (Martin 2005). La Corona project epigrapher David Stuart (2012) has discerned a reference to the founding of the Kaanal court at Calakmul in AD 635 in an inscription discovered by PRALC in 2012 (Barrientos Q., Canuto, and Ponce 2013).

³ The same analysis was performed with 30 m DEMs developed from the ASTER remote sensor. These paths are not shown, however, because the available 30 m ASTER DEMs did not cover the entire southern area of the Peten (i.e., they excluded Cancuen and Dos Pilas). However, the least-cost paths based on these 30 m DEMs from Zapote Bobal (Hix Witz) to Calakmul through La Corona were similar to those of the 90 m SRTM DEMs. The paths from these two different DEMs did not stray more than 4 kms from one another throughout the ~150 km trek.

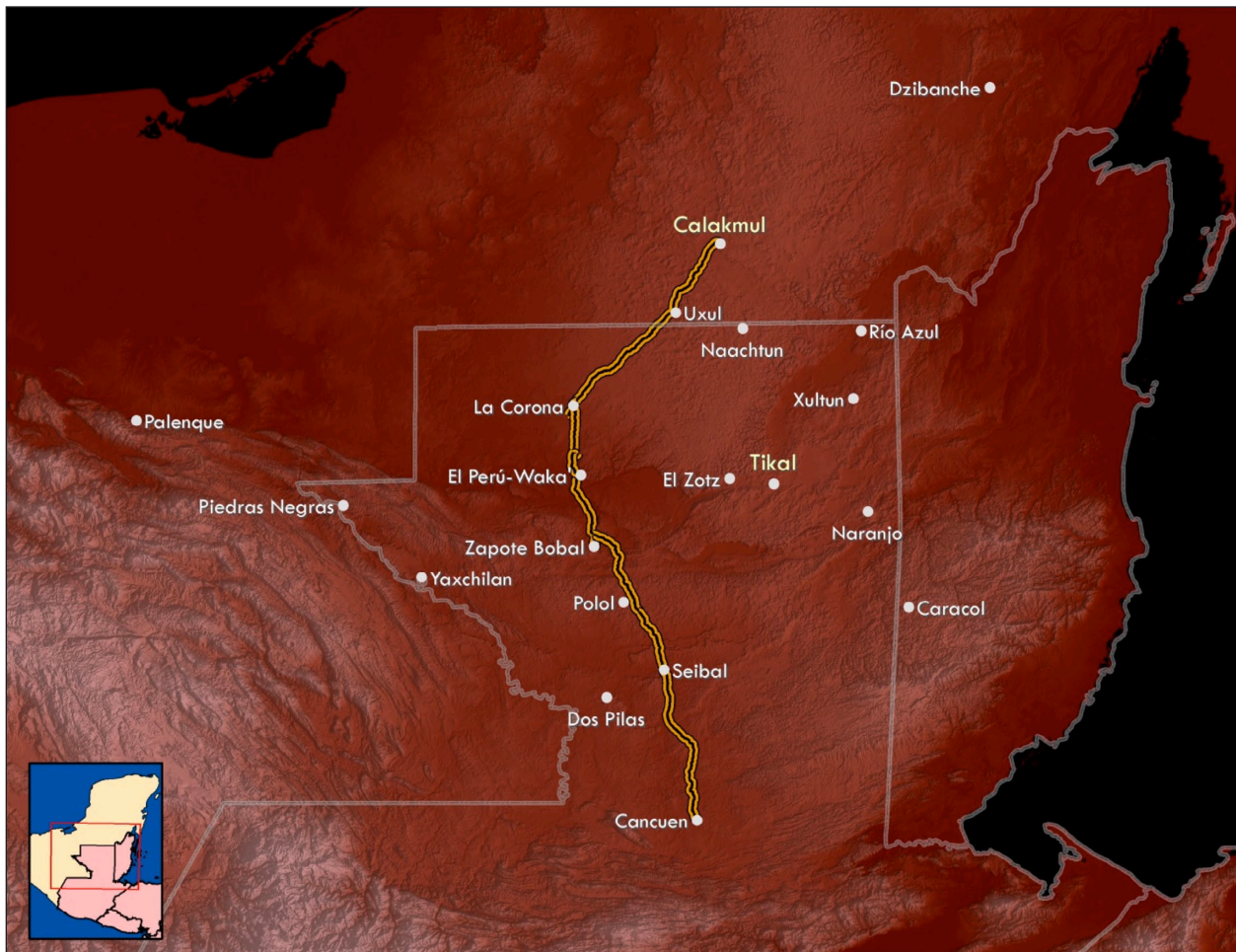


Figure 1. Hypothesized route linking Calakmul – La Corona – Cancuen.

of such a route would be suggested by (1) the existence of a Kaanal-allied site in between La Corona and Uxul, and (2) evidence that La Corona was heavily impacted by the development of, and its inclusion on, this route of exchange. Continuing regional survey and excavations in the La Corona region will help determine the nature of this route and La Corona's role in the region.

It is important to bear in mind that the Early Classic Kaanal dynasty was seated at Dzibanche (Velásquez García 2004, 2008). However, since both La Corona and El Perú-Waka' had close associations with the dynasty in this period as well (Freidel et al. 2007; Freidel and Guenter 2003; Martin 2008), it is possible therefore that this route would have been equally important to Early Classic Kaanal in providing access to the Río San Pedro. However, more information on Early Classic political relationships is necessary to strengthen such a model.

Clearly, La Corona's location proved important to Kaanal; but it is unlikely the only reason explaining their close relationship, even during the

Late Classic period. For this reason PRALC will continue to investigate what other advantages La Corona's location provided—such as rich bajo soils, an abundance of water, a defensible outpost—that rendered it of such special and sustained interest to kings of Kaanal.

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