

# TOPONYMS, EMBLEM GLYPHS, AND THE POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF SOUTHERN CAMPECHE

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents new epigraphic data from southern Campeche, Mexico, at which it focuses on the occurrences of toponyms and emblem glyphs and their meaning for the understanding of the Classic Maya political geography. Observing that several emblem glyphs found in the inscriptions at some recently (re)located archaeological sites are incomplete versions, lacking certain elements characteristic of full emblems, the author labels them ‘toponymic titles’ and suggests they denote lower positions of the corresponding polities in regional political hierarchy. One of the only two full emblem glyphs known so far in southern Campeche corresponds to the Kaan dynasty, during a certain period associated with Calakmul, while the identity of the other one, representing a bat, is questionable, although in the late period it may have been adopted by Oxpekul, a centre that seems to have benefited from the demise of Calakmul.

**Key words:** Maya epigraphy, Classic period, political geography, emblem glyphs.

Our knowledge of the political divisions within the Ancient Maya World predominantly relies on epigraphic data. In particular, the distribution of emblem glyphs has been employed as a means to reconstruct the political geography of the Maya lowlands. These hieroglyphs, which were discovered by Heinrich Berlin (1958), share a common structure, but contain elements that are particular and unique to each of the larger sites. Initially, emblem glyphs were understood either as a reference to dynasties, ruling families or states. However, in our current understanding, emblem glyphs are royal titles carried by kings of particular kingdoms or polities. So far, approximately 50 emblem glyphs are known from the Maya lowlands. This large number has been considered to prove that the Maya lowlands were divided into a patchwork of small and competing petty states (Mathews 1985; 1991). For a long time, scholars saw these ‘peer polities’ as equally small and fluctuating political entities that could grow or disappear very quickly, depending on the charisma of their rulers. More recent research carried out by Simon Martin and the author of this article shows that not all of these states were equal, and that some of the states managed to establish dynamic hegemonic networks (Martin and Grube 1995; 2000; Grube

and Martin 1998). During the Classic Period, the political relations within the central part of the Maya lowlands were dominated by the antagonism of two strong powers, Tikal on one side, and the rulers of the Kaan dynasty on the other. The rulers of the Kaan dynasty are identified by an emblem glyph with a serpent head (*kaan*) as its principal element. For many years, the large city of Calakmul in southern Campeche has been considered to be the location of the Kaan dynasty, and the Kaan emblem glyph was understood as the emblem of Calakmul. However, recent research shows that the Kaan emblem glyph was not associated with Calakmul during the Early Classic period. Simon Martin has shown that the Kaan emblem first appeared at the site during the reign of Yuknoom Ch'een the Great (A.D. 636-686), one of the most powerful and influential kings that has ever reigned in the Maya lowlands (Martin and Grube 2000: 108-109). He also pointed out that the Kaan emblem glyph disappeared from Calakmul at A.D. 736, when the Kaan king Yuknoom Took' K'awiil was depicted as a captive on Tikal Altar 9.

This insight into the dynamic nature of the Maya emblem glyphs and the fact that Calakmul was not permanently the powerful political entity represented by the lords of the Kaan emblem forces us to reconsider the previous models of southern Campeche political geography. In the past, Calakmul was seen as the single dominant power of this region and all other sites in its vicinity were considered as its satellites. This interpretation reached

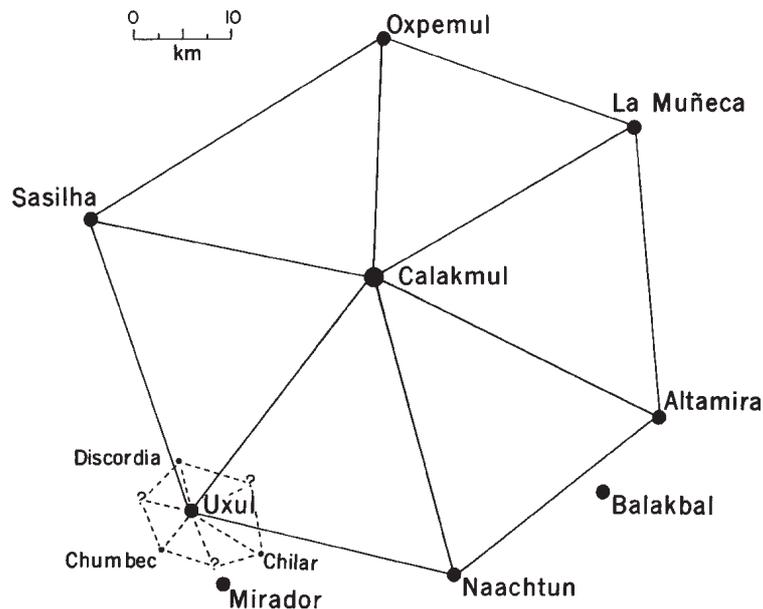


Figure 1. The model of the Calakmul "regional state" as proposed by Marcus (1976: 27).

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its clearest form of expression in the regional state model developed by Marcus (1976: 27), where Calakmul is seen as a regional capital surrounded by six nearly equidistant dependencies (Fig. 1). For a long time, the only information that was available as regards the size, architecture and inscriptions of these ‘dependencies’ was Ruppert and Denison’s report of their exploration of southern Campeche in the 1930s (Ruppert and Denison 1943). Fortunately, the recent archaeological survey of southern Campeche by Ivan Šprajc and his colleagues (Šprajc et al. 1997a; 1997b, Šprajc and Suárez Aguilar 1998; Šprajc 2004; Šprajc et al. 2005) has offered significant new information on the sites in the vicinity of Calakmul that now allows a reassessment of the relationship between Calakmul and its hinterland.

The following article explores the political geography of southern Campeche, focusing on the emblem glyphs and toponymic titles of four large sites with a substantial corpus of inscriptions, which were explored as a part of the regional survey project in southern Campeche under the guidance of Šprajc. Marcus (1976: 25-27) considers two of these sites, Uxul and Oxpemul, to be dependencies of Calakmul, while the other two sites, Champerico and Los Alacranes, have been only recently discovered, however it is obvious that they were in the orbit of the Kaan polity at some point in time.

## Los Alacranes

Los Alacranes is a major archaeological site located on two hills on both sides of the modern village of the same name. During the archaeological survey of southern Campeche in 1996 two stelae were discovered at the site (Šprajc et al. 1997a: 6-7; 1997b: 36-38; Šprajc 2004: 388-390). Stela 1 was erected in front of a pyramid approximately 8 m high on the eastern extreme of the East Complex, while Stela 2 was placed at the base of a slightly larger mound located at the eastern extreme of the West Complex. Both stelae are only carved on their front sides. Of the two monuments, Stela 1 is better preserved because it is executed in relief, while most of the carving on Stela 2 is in extremely low relief and has disappeared. On Stela 1, several fields of hieroglyphs frame the badly damaged image of a standing figure holding a double headed ceremonial bar. In the monument’s lower register several smaller figures depicting bound captives can be seen.

Only one of the glyph panels on the monument is preserved to such an extent that its hieroglyphic inscription can be read (Fig. 2). The text begins with a reference to the birth of a lord named **SAK WITZ-il B’AAH**, *sak witzil b’aah*, or ‘white mountain top’, on 8<sup>th</sup> November, A.D. 504. The name of the lord is followed by an emblem glyph **b’u-k’a-AJAW-wa**, *b’uuk’ajaw*, ‘lord of B’uuk’ (Fig. 3a). This hieroglyph has been identified as the local emblem of Los Alacranes (Grube 2004a). However, a word of caution is necessary: the hieroglyph in question lacks the **K’UHUL** prefix, which is crucial for the full forms of emblem glyphs as first defined by Berlin. The B’uuk glyph is much more similar to the ‘problematic emblem glyphs’ described by Houston (1986) and some of the place glyphs identified by Stuart and Houston (1994). Most likely, B’uuk’ was a toponym and became a royal title through the addition of the **AJAW** sign. The lack of the **K’UHUL** ‘divine’ prefix in the so called ‘problematic emblem glyphs’ is certainly not merely an

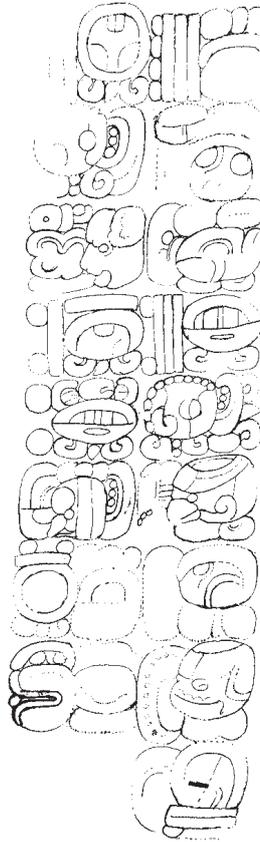


Figure 2. The principal text cartouche on Los Alacranes Stela 2.



Figure 3. The **b'u-k'a** toponymic title of Los Alacranes on Stela 1 (a) and Stela 2 (b) of Los Alacranes, on polychrome vase Kerr 5241 (c), polychrome vase Kerr 7524 (d), and in the name of the captive from Xultun Stela 21 (e).

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accident. The lack probably reflects a lesser rank in the still not clearly understood hierarchy of Maya political units and their governing institutions. This significant issue will be readdressed at the end of this article. At the present moment, I will use the term ‘toponymic title’ for all of these pseudo emblem glyphs without the **K’UHUL** attribute in order to distinguish them from full emblems.

The B’uuk’ toponymic title also appears in another glyph panel on Stela 1, although erosion made it much harder to identify the signs. It can also be detected in a severely eroded phrase on Los Alacranes Stela 2 (Fig. 3b). Apart from these local mentions, the B’uuk’ toponymic title is also found on two Late Classic polychrome ceramics of unknown origin (Kerr 5241 and 7524; Figs. 3c and 3d), suggesting that these were made at, or at least commissioned by, the royal court of Los Alacranes. Finally, a ‘lord of B’uuk’ also appears as one of the two captives on the bottom of Xultun Stela 21 (Fig. 3e). Unfortunately, the stela is undated and therefore does not aid us in determining the *terminus ante quem* for the battle in which the captives were taken. However, Los Alacranes must have been under the sway of the Kaan dynasty during the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The hieroglyphic inscription on Stela 1 ends with a sentence that describes the accession to power of the local king under the auspices (*u kab’jiy*) of Sky Witness of the Kaan dynasty (Martin

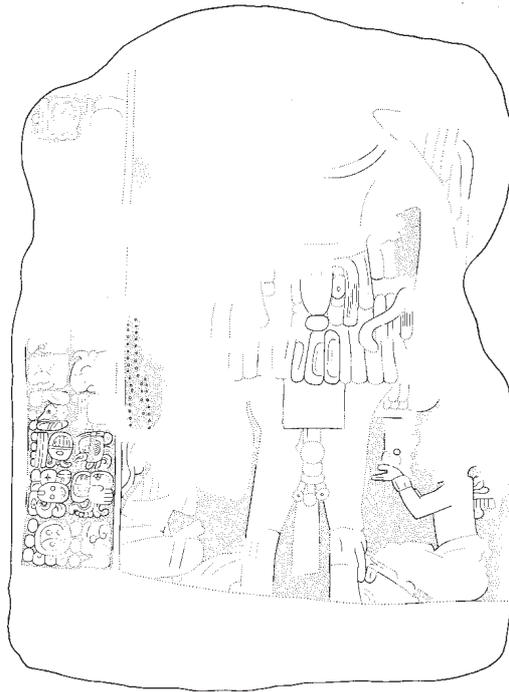


Figure 4. Champerico Stela 1.

and Grube 2000: 104).

## Champerico

The archaeological site of Champerico is located in the southeastern part of the Calakmul Biosphere, approximately 33 km southeast of Calakmul. Three stelae and a fragment of a hieroglyphic panel or lintel have been recorded. Two of the monuments show traces of hieroglyphic texts, which also include place glyphs. Stela 1 records a *k'al tuun*, or 'stone binding' ceremony at 9.9.0.0.0 (7<sup>th</sup> May, A.D. 613), as well as the accession of a local lord on 9.8.0.6.3 (21<sup>st</sup> December, A.D. 593) (Fig. 4). Although the name of the local lord has disappeared, a toponymic title that follows his name has been preserved. This toponym shows the split head of a bird and another bird or animal sitting on top (Fig. 5a). A dot, probably marking the number one, is written in front. The same compound also appears on Champerico Stela 3 in association with the 9.9.10.0.0 half-K'atun ending date (18<sup>th</sup> March, A.D. 623), following the name of a lord who could well be the same as the one who had erected Stela 1 only ten years earlier (Fig. 5b).

Like the B'uuk' toponymic title from Los Alacranes, the Champerico glyph cannot be called a true emblem glyph. The two preserved examples of the Champerico glyph are short of both the **K'UHUL** prefix as well as the **AJAW** superfix, distinguishing them even more from full emblems.

## Uxul

Uxul was discovered during the final week of the third Carnegie expedition to southern Campeche in April 1934 (Ruppert and Denison 1943: 74-77). Ruppert and Denison noticed the existence of fifteen stelae and six altars at the site (Ruppert and Denison 1943: 146-150). With the exception of Altar 2, a monument with a long inscription, which has become famous for its unusual incorporation of three Long Count dates and which has been brought to the city of Campeche, where it is now on display in Reducto de San Miguel, all monuments are still at the site, although the majority of the stelae are in very a sorry state of preservation.

Several monuments carry a toponymic title, which consists of a very rare sign combination that includes the three signs **NAAH-k'a-NAAH** and an **AJAW** sign as a superfix (Fig. 6). Although the title is phonetically transparent, it is semantically opaque. The toponymic title first appears on Uxul Altar 2, where it can be found in at least two different places in this long inscription of 159 glyph blocks (Fig. 6a). The Naah-K'a-Naah-Ajaw title also appears in an accession statement of the local king on Stela 6, erected to commemorate the 9.11.0.0.0 period ending in A.D. 652 (Fig. 6b). The same ruler erected Stela 10 in 9.12.5.0.0 (A.D. 677) and used this glyph as his principal title (Fig. 6c). Finally, the toponym is also found as the last glyph on the right side of Uxul Stela 14, a monument which carries the date 9.13.0.0.0 (A.D. 692) and which was very likely erected by another lord of Uxul (Fig. 6d).

## Oxpemul

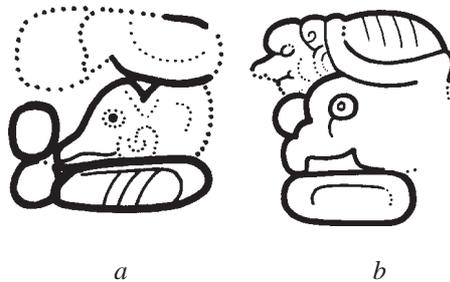


Figure 5. The toponymic titles of Champerico on Stela 1 (a) and Stela 3 (b) of Champerico.

Oxpemul was discovered by Ruppert and Denison during the third Carnegie expedition to southern Campeche in February 1934, but has not been revisited until 2004 (Šprajc et al. 2005). The site is located approximately 22 km northeast of Calakmul (within the Calakmul Biosphere) and consists of two principal groups on two hills. 19 stelae and several altars have been recorded by Ruppert and Denison (1943: 136-142). With the exception of Stela 15, all monuments are still at the site, and all of the monuments that were reported as still standing by Ruppert and Denison were still encountered erect when the site was rediscovered in 2004. Numerous monuments at Oxpemul are well preserved and their texts are still readable (Robichaux and Pruett 2005; Šprajc and Grube 2005).

Although the dated monuments at Oxpemul were erected only after 9.15.0.0.0 (A.D. 731), Oxpemul Stela 1, which stands in front of Structure III, is stylistically an early Classic monument, depicting a ruler holding a ceremonial bar. Unfortunately, Stela 1 has no text or date preserved on it. Except for this stela, all other monuments at Oxpemul were erected in the Late and Terminal Classic periods between A.D. 731 and 849. Several texts at Oxpemul contain a toponymic title in a position that leaves no doubt that it was used as a reference to Oxpemul itself (Fig. 7). The toponymic title consists of two signs: a bent 'Kawak' sign, which in other contexts seems to refer to thrones or altars, as well as one or two small signs that sit in its upper left, or upper left and lower right corners (Folan et al. 2005: Fig. 6). Unfortunately, the faint detail of this infixed sign has disappeared in all cases, thus we do not know the ancient name of Oxpemul, except that the place was referred to as some kind of throne or place of altars, which seems quite appropriate given the extraordinary large number of carved altars found in association with the stelae. The throne/altar toponym is usually combined with an **AJAW** superfix. At Oxpemul the toponymic title is found five times: on Stela 12, C4 (9.15.0.0.0), Stela 17, C8 (9.15.0.0.0), Stela 18, D6 (9.16.5.0.0), Stela 4, D3 (9.17.0.0.0), and finally on Stela 7, C1 (10.0.0.0.0). In all cases, the toponymic title follows the name of the local ruler.

While the use of a local toponymic title is not unusual, the combination with other

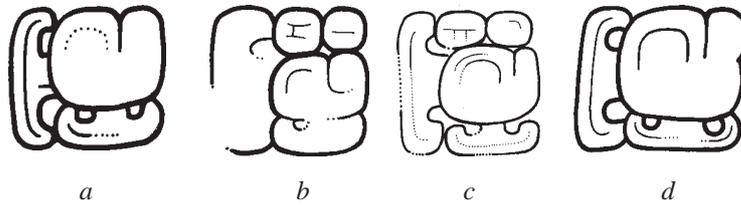


Figure 6. The toponymic title of Uxul on Altar 2, E3 (a), Stela 6, A5 (b), Stela 10, Fragments 1 and 2, Ep3 (c), and Stela 14, D6 (d) of Uxul.

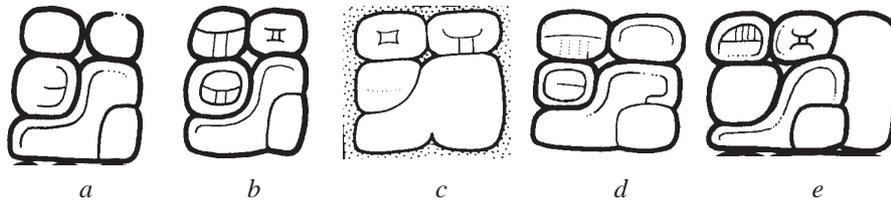


Figure 7. The throne/altar toponymic title of Oxpemul on Stela 12, C4 (a), Stela 17, C8 (b), Stela 18, D6 (c), Stela 4, D3 (d), and Stela 7, C1 (e) of Oxpemul.

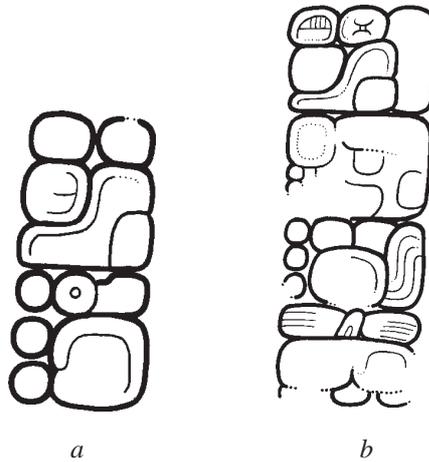


Figure 8. The Uxte'Tuun, „Three Stones“, toponym at Oxpemul on Stela 12, C5 (a) and Stela 7, C3 (b).

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toponymic titles and emblems in the inscriptions of Oxpemul is of great interest. On two, possibly three stelae there are references to the toponym Uxte' Tuun (Stela 12, C5 (9.15.0.0.0), Stela 7, C3 (10.0.0.0.0): Fig. 8), which Stuart and Houston (1994: 28-29) have linked to Calakmul. The Uxte' Tuun toponym is currently understood as one of the names of the archaeological site of Calakmul, or at least one of the areas within the site or under its control (Martin 2005: 5). This interpretation is very plausible given the numerous local references to Uxte' Tuun at Calakmul, especially on monuments associated with Structure I. The new evidence from Oxpemul is difficult to explain, especially since Calakmul and Oxpemul make references to Uxte' Tuun at precisely the same date, the 9.15.0.0.0 period ending in A.D. 731. The most likely interpretation seems to be that the contemporary lord of Oxpemul, whose name in some way refers to the Sun God, may have been related to one of the noble families of Calakmul through kinship ties.

Two inscriptions from Oxpemul mention a full emblem glyph with a bat head as its main sign. On Altar 15, which shows a Pawajtuun figure on its surface (Fig. 9a), an emblem glyph with a bat head as its main sign occurs as one of only two glyphs written in a cartouche on its side (Fig. 9b). The glyph that follows is the title *kalo'mte'*, the most exclusive of all royal titles, which is reserved only for a few truly powerful and influential kings. Unfortunately, no name is found in connection with the bat emblem on Altar 15, and the associated Stela 16 is so eroded that neither dates nor any other historical information can be obtained from it. Fortunately, the context of the other bat emblem at Oxpemul is more transparent and better preserved. On Stela 2, D2, the bat emblem forms a part of the title phrase of lord Chak Tajal Way ... Chan K'inich, who reigned at Oxpemul during the 9.17.0.0.0 period ending recorded on the right side of the monument (Fig. 10b). His long nominal phrase extends over the entire lower part of the back of Stela 2 (Fig. 10a) and continues on the left side with a severely eroded title and the bat emblem. The following hieroglyphs provide the **u-B'AAH-hi u-1-TAHN-na** *u b'aah u juntahn* 'he is the cherished one of' metaphor, which expresses a child-of-mother relationship and always precedes the name of the mother (Stuart 1997). In this case, the name of the mother follows in the long female nominal sequence. This example of the bat emblem leaves no doubt that the king of Oxpemul used it at this time as his personal title. In a paper presented at the 2005 Texas Meetings, I have taken this as evidence that the bat emblem was the name of the political entity of which Oxpemul was the capital (Grube 2005).

Simon Martin has recently pointed out that the bat emblem also appears on three monuments from Calakmul – on Stela 114, dated to the 9.0.0.0.0 period ending (A.D. 435), on Stela 62 from 9.11.0.0.0 (A.D. 651), and finally on Stela 59 that was erected in 9.15.10.0.0 (A.D. 741). To this one might add another example from the left side of Stela 52, dating to 9.15.0.0.0<sup>1</sup>. Martin points out that the bat emblem is used at Calakmul before and after the appearance of the Kaan emblem (Martin 2005). He sees the bat emblem as a governing authority of Early Classic Calakmul, probably even an overlord that presided

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<sup>1</sup> This occurrence was pointed out to me by Carlos Pallán in November, 2005.

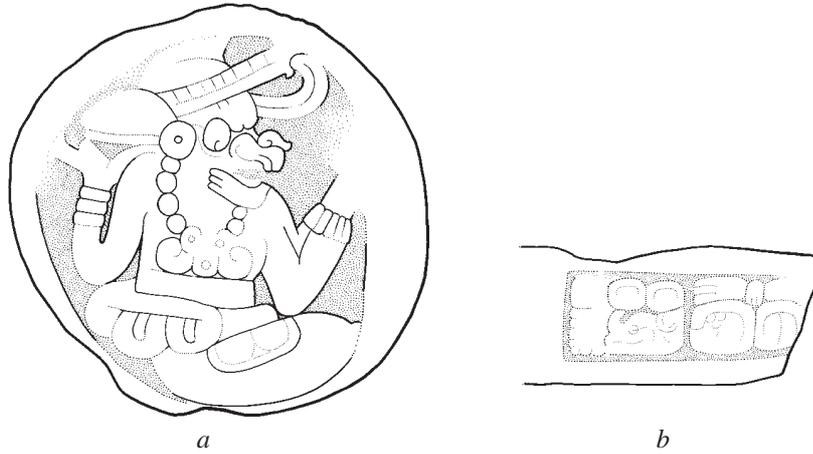


Figure 9. Oxpemul Altar 15: the surface, showing a seated Pawajtuun (a); the hieroglyphic cartouche on the side (b).

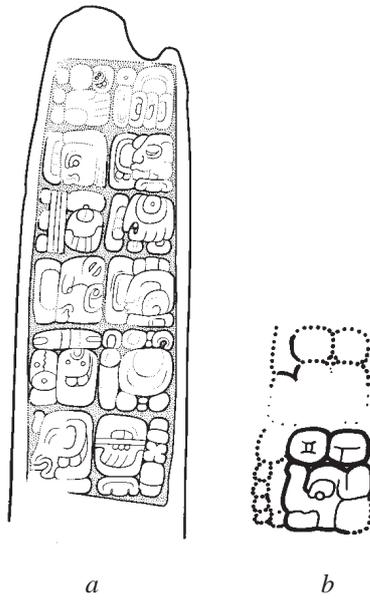


Figure 10. The bat emblem glyph on Oxpemul Stela 2: the text on the back side of the monument (a); the continuation of the text on the right side (b).

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over a local governor (Martin 2005: 11). In this scenario, the arrival of the Kaan lords interrupted the regime of the lords associated with the bat emblem. After the fall of the Kaan dynasty in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, the bat emblem reappears as the title of at least one of the Calakmul kings.

Although the bat emblem appears at least four times at Calakmul, the precise location of the political entity referred to by the bat emblem still remains opaque. The bat emblem seems to have enjoyed a wide distribution and is found not only at Oxpeul and Calakmul. A clear example of the bat emblem also appears in the final passage of Naachtun Stela 23 (Fig. 11). The context of this mention leaves no doubt that in this case the bat emblem is not employed in a local reference. The preceding text includes a date (ŠTzolk'in] 11 Sek), followed by a verb and some kind of relationship statement (probably *y-itaaj*). The next glyph seems to be a name composed of a prefix and a head sign and precedes the bat emblem glyph.

There are a few other examples of bat glyphs in toponymic contexts in inscriptions from southern Campeche. In none of these cases is the association with the bat emblem straightforward. A bat glyph appears as a toponymic title on the right side of Uxul Stela 2. Unfortunately, the context is opaque, since the preceding glyphs are all broken off except for the *kalo'mte'* title, which stands immediately before the bat glyph. Here, a small affix precedes the bat glyph, which lacks the **K'UHUL** and **AJAW** elements of the real bat emblem. This could imply that this bat glyph in fact refers to a different place or entity. However, the association with the *kalo'mte'* title is most certainly of high significance, since this paramount title is used only by few powerful cities.

Another bat glyph appears in a similarly opaque context on the right side of

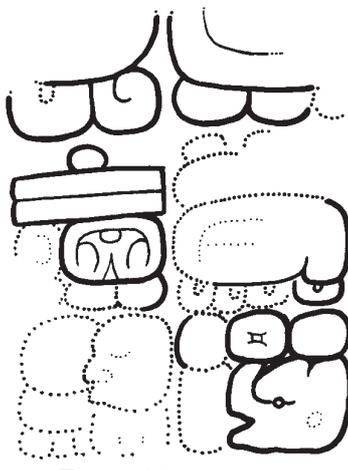


Figure 11. The bat emblem glyph on Naachtun Stela 23.

Balakbal Stela 5. In this case, the bat glyph appears in a name or title phrase of a lord who was involved in the burial of another lord. The bat glyph appears with one or two prefixed signs as well as a – now eroded – superfix. The position following the name suggests that the bat glyph is used as a toponymic title of the local lord. Balakbal Stela 5 also explicitly mentions another place name in the final part of the right side inscription. The toponym is accompanied by the common **CHAN-CH'EN-na** 'sky place/cave' expression, which often follows toponyms. Unfortunately, the toponym itself is gone.

In summary, the bat emblem glyphs in their full form are found at Calakmul, Oxpemul and Naachtun. At Naachtun the reference is to a foreign lord, while the Calakmul and Oxpemul references are associated with the local ruling dynasties. At Oxpemul, the bat emblem is associated with the *kalo'mte* title, suggesting that the lords of the bat polity were of the highest political rank within the Maya lowlands.

## **Discussion**

Due to the small number of full emblem glyphs, as defined by Heinrich Berlin, southern Campeche differs from the remaining regions in the Maya lowlands. Except for the Kaan and bat emblems there are – at least until now - no other emblem glyphs known from this vast and poorly explored area, which constitutes the northern border of the Classic lowland Maya political and dynastic network. The lack of full emblem glyphs can most certainly not be explained by a different political rhetoric. The discovery of Altar de los Reyes Altar 3 with its long list of emblem glyphs (Grube 2004b: Fig. 5) shows that the ruling houses in this region formed a part of the political network of the lowlands and participated in the same political rhetoric. The lack of full emblem glyphs at important sites such as Oxpemul and Uxul can only be explained as an expression of hierarchy between the powerful regional centres and places with only limited and localised power. In this scenario, Uxul, Champerico and Los Alacranes were sites that were always under the influence of more dominant powers, probably either the bat emblem or the lords of Kaan. These three sites erected their monuments when the Kaan dynasty witnessed the zenith of its influence. On the other hand, Oxpemul started erecting monuments, with the exception of Stela 1, during the Late Classic period. The program of monument erection at Oxpemul began in A.D. 731, after Calakmul witnessed its first defeat by Tikal in A.D. 695, and only five years before A.D. 736, when the Calakmul ruler was depicted as a captive at Tikal and the Kaan emblem was used for the last time in association with a king who had his seat in Calakmul (Martin 2005). This suggests that Oxpemul benefited from the collapse of the Kaan dynasty. The inscription on Oxpemul Stela 3, which mentions some sort of activity at Oxpemul in the presence of three lords of Tikal (Šprajc and Grube 2005), hints towards new political alliances with the only remaining superpower of the Terminal Classic period. At some point, Oxpemul may even have become the seat of the bat polity, which may have been a powerful ruling house in southern Campeche before the arrival of the lords of Kaan (Martin 2005).

Toponymic titles may point to a lesser level in the hierarchy of sites in the Maya lowlands. It is likely that these sites with what Houston called 'problematic emblem glyphs'

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originated as dependencies or even colonies of more potent centres, which used full emblems. A much deeper research on the distribution of toponymic titles in contrast with emblem glyphs needs to be conducted. A parallel case to southern Campeche may be the sites in the vicinity of Tikal, which also lack full emblems, such as Xultun and Río Azul, probably even Caracol, where a similar hierarchy may have existed as in southern Campeche.

It is also important to notice that the toponymic titles found at Uxul, Champerico and Los Alacranes have no outreach at all. They are not cited anywhere else, which is a sign of their small geopolitical importance. It seems that all major ‘international’ activities were in the hands of the local powers, such as the Kaan dynasty and the lords of the bat emblem, wherever it was situated.

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## **Povzetek**

Toponimi, emblemski glifi in politična geografija južnega Campecheja

Članek predstavlja nekatere nove epigrafske podatke z južnega dela mehiške zvezne države Campeche, s poudarkom na pojavljanju toponimov in emblemskih glifov ter njihovem pomenu za razumevanje politične geografije klasičnodobnih Majev. Med emblemskimi glifi, ki so bili najdeni v napisih na nekaterih nedavno (ponovno) odkritih arheoloških najdiščih, najde več nepopolnih različic, ki nimajo nekaterih elementov, značilnih za popolne variante; imenuje jih "toponimski naslovi" in domneva, da razodevajo nižje položaje zadevnih političnih enot v regionalni politični hierarhiji. Eden od edinih dveh popolnih emblemskih glifov, doslej znanih v južnem Campecheju, ustreza dinastiji Kaan, ki je v določenem obdobju imela sedež v Calakmulu, medtem ko je identita drugega, ki predstavlja netopirja, vprašljiva, čeprav si ga je v kasnejšem času morda prisvojil Oxpemul, center, ki se je nemara okoristil s propadom Calakmula.

**Ključne besede:** majevska epigrafika, klasična doba, politična geografija, emblemski glifi.