

**THE QUEEN OF EL PERÚ-  
WAKA'  
NEW DISCOVERIES IN AN ANCIENT MAYA TEMPLE**

**THE EL PERÚ-WAKÁ ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT**

El Perú-Waka' is an ancient Maya city in northwestern Petén, Guatemala. It was part of Classic Maya civilization (200-900 AD) in the southern lowlands. It is located approximately 75 km west of the famous city of Tikal. The city center consists of nearly a sq km of plazas, palaces, temple pyramids, and residences surrounded by many sq km of dispersed residences and temples.

The El Perú-Waka' project is sponsored by the Foundation for the Cultural and Natural Patrimony of Guatemala (PACUNAM.) The project was originally funded by the Jerome E. Glick Foundation of St. Louis and has received support from the National Geographic Society, the National Science Foundation, and the U.S. Department of the Interior in addition to private benefactors.

The project carries out research and analysis under the auspices of the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Guatemala.

The project has been carrying out investigations at El Perú-Waka' since 2003.

The current co-directors of the project are Principal Investigator Dr. David Freidel, Professor of Anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis and Lic. Juan Carlos Pérez, former Vice Minister of Culture for Cultural Heritage of Guatemala. The Operations Supervisor for the long-term investigation of Structure M13-1 and a future co-director of the project is Dr. Olivia Navarro Farr, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at College of Wooster in Ohio. Lic. Griselda Pérez, former Director of Prehistoric Monuments in the National Institute of Anthropology and History excavated Structure M13-1 and Burial 61 with Olivia Navarro Farr and Juan Carlos Pérez. Lic. Damaris Menendez also excavated in Structure M13-1 during the first half of the field season. Arq. Francisco Castañeda participated in the project with logistical support and as a photographer and expeditor as did Dr. Michelle E. Rich, assistant director, future co-director, and Operations Supervisor in the Mirador Group in the eastern sector of the ancient city.

The site of El Perú-Waka', along with the site of La Corona ca. 20 km to the north, is within an enclave of high canopy rain forest and archaeological sites on the Guatemalan nomination list for World Heritage Site status as a cultural and natural landscape site.

**ANCIENT POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY**

The site of El Perú-Waka' covers about a square kilometer and it is composed of public plazas, temple pyramids, palaces and residences. These buildings are all now rubble mounds covered with high canopy mature rain forest. The site is surrounded by more thinly dispersed residences and temple mounds that extend out in all directions for several kilometers comprising the kingdom of Wak (wahk), the Centipede dynasty. The city is situated on a defensible escarpment over the San Juan River, a tributary flowing northeast to southwest into the San Pedro Martir River, a major artery of southern lowland Maya civilization flowing east to west from the interior to the Usumacinta River, which defines the region of

the western kingdoms of the Maya world. This east-west route continues eastward along a great series of dramatic escarpments to the city of Tikal. This east-west route was important to the regional history of the southern lowland Classic Maya world and El Perú-Waka's position commanding it made its rulers important actors in Classic Maya history. An overland route along the western side of the hill country bordering the central karstic plateau that straddles northern Petén and southern Campeche, Mexico, linked El Perú-Waka', by way of the site of La Corona just to the north, to cities of a powerful kingdom ruled by the Kan or Snake dynasty. The Classic period Kan kings started using this overland route to establish suzerainty over kingdoms in the Petén beginning in the sixth century. The motivations for the Kan kings to move south along this route included taking control of the east-west river route of the San Pedro Martir.

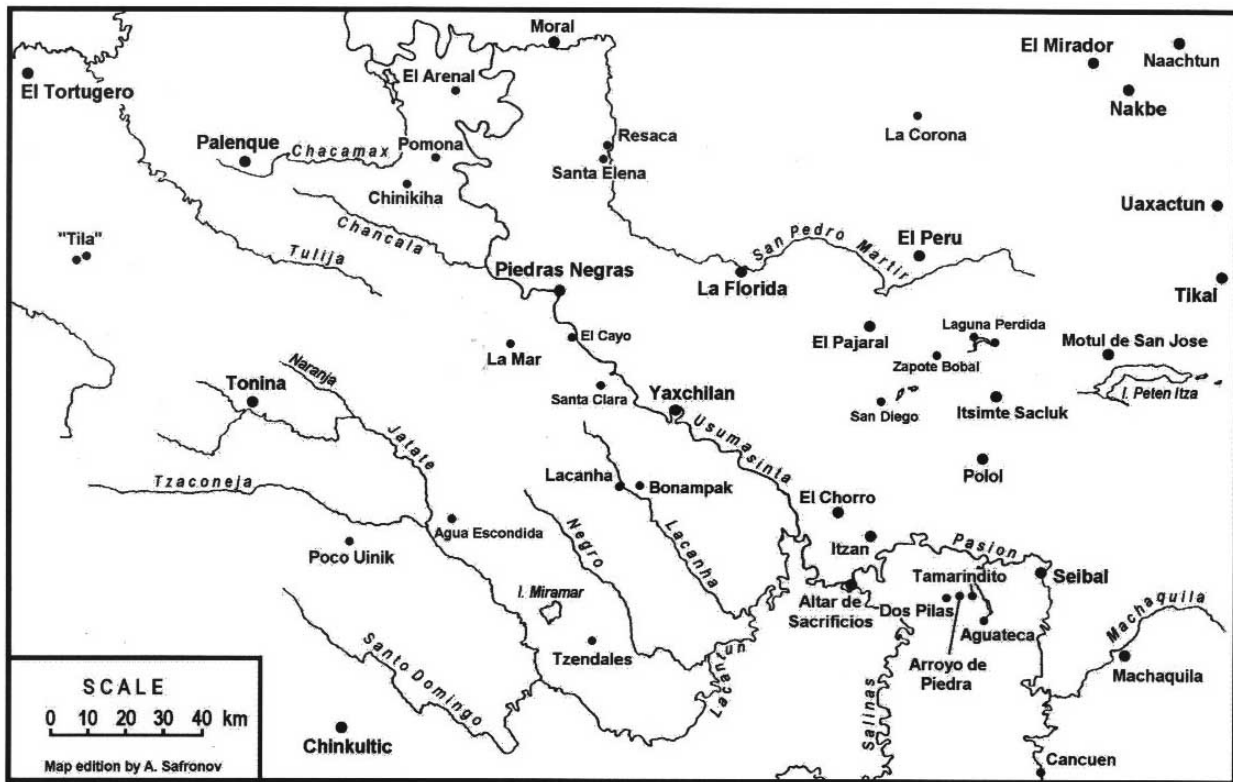


Figure 1: Map of western Peten and adjacent parts of the Maya world (Image by A. Safronov)

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY

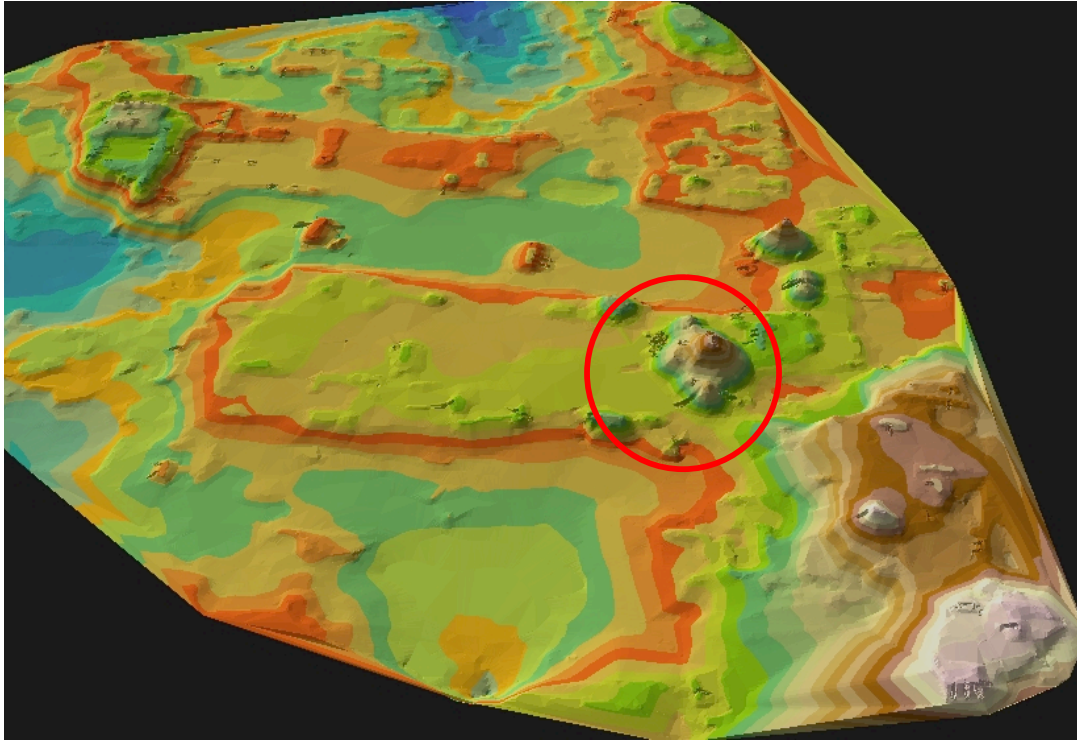
During the seventh century AD the Wak (centipede) dynasty rulers were loyal vassals to the Kan (Snake) dynasty rulers. The Kan king Yuhknoom Ch'een the Great (600-686) conquered the Petén during his reign (636-686) and established an empire in the Maya lowlands. He was aided in this effort by the Wak king K'inich Bahlam II, to whom he married a woman of his family, the royal princess K'abel. K'abel ruled with her husband K'inich Bahlam for at least 20 years (672-692) although it is likely that she ruled longer than this. She was the military governor of the Wak kingdom for the emperor and she carried the title Kaloomte', Supreme Warrior, higher in authority than her husband the king. She was the most powerful woman we know about in western Petén during the Kan Empire of the seventh century. She was of the same generation as the successor to Yuhknoom Ch'een, Yuhknoom Yich'aak K'ahk'. Experts in ancient Maya history believe that these two rulers were siblings and the children of Emperor Yuhknoom Ch'een. What is certain is that all three of these rulers figure prominently in the texts on carved

monuments at El Perú-Waka'. Kaloomte' K'abel is well known in Maya archaeology because a beautiful portrait of her, El Peru Stela 34, was looted from El Perú-Waka' in the sixties and is in the Cleveland Art Museum. K'inich Bahlam II on El Peru Stela 33 is in the Kimbell Art Museum and a replica of this monument will be installed at Waka'.



**Figure 2: El Peru Stelae 33 (left) and 34 (right), portraying K'inich Bahlam II and Lady K'abel**

Excavations between 2003 and 2006 in the main temple of the city center of Waka', Structure M13-1, revealed that worshippers from the late eighth and early ninth centuries had used this sacred place for generations after the fall of the royal dynasty sometime around 800 AD. These post-royal city dwellers had placed layers of offerings over surfaces on the building. They had also dragged heavy fragments of royal stelae and arranged these along the front of it. Excavations in 2012 were designed to clear and define the architecture of the temple along the main stairway to determine its history of construction and why it remained so revered after the fall of the dynasty.

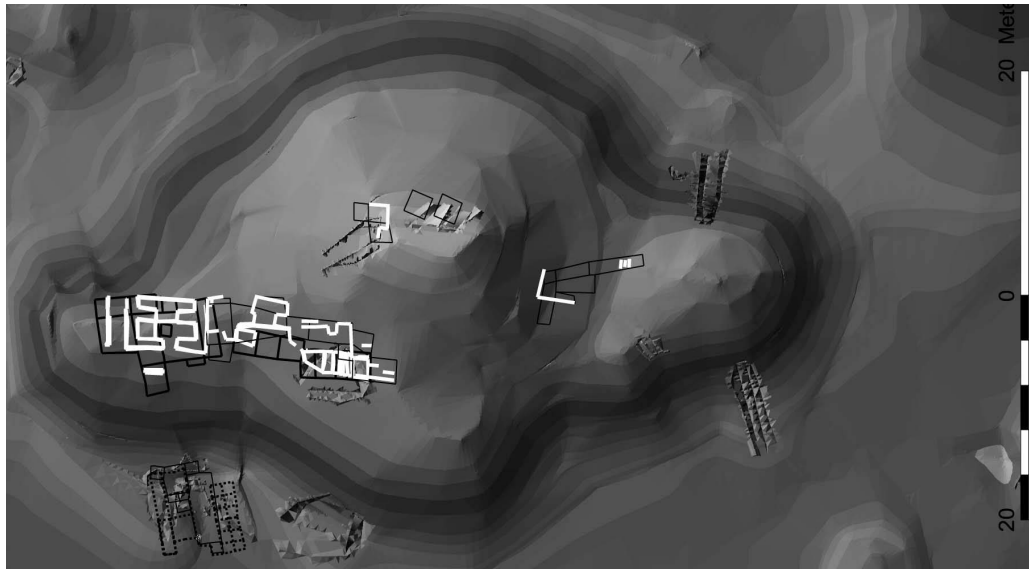


**Figure 3: Structure M13-1, the main temple in the city center of Waka'**

### **THE CITY TEMPLE AND THE QUEEN'S TOMB**

The investigations in Structure M13-1 carried out between March and June of 2012 focused on the base of the central stairway and on a shrine locality on the stairway mid-way between the base and the summit of the main pyramid. This architectural design, where there is a shrine on the stairway, is called an adosada shrine and it commonly found at the ancient city of Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico. There is clear historical evidence that El Perú-Waka's rulers participated in a regional alliance of Maya kingdoms involving Teotihuacan during the fourth and fifth centuries. Initially archaeologists thought they would document construction from that Early Classic era on Structure M13-1. Excavations during 2012, however, revealed major construction dating to later centuries and to the alliance between the Wak dynasty and the Kan dynasty rulers.





**Figure 4 Structure M13-1 showing excavations 2003-2006. Illustration by Evangelia Tsesmeli**

At the base of the main stairway excavators discovered that the final phase of construction dated after the fall of the dynasty and was made of cut stones quarried from nearby earlier buildings on the plaza. The centerline of the stairway was largely blocked off from ascent to the adosada shrine. Access was accommodated by the creation of a narrow flanking stairway on the south side. The builders of this final version of the stairway embedded fragments of royal stelae into the terrace walls along the front and sides, and this staircase covered an enormous early altar with an eroded glyphic text on its top. Along the front terrace to the north of this altar they placed a large fragment of a monument that appears to be the upper third of Stela 9, whose lower third had been placed on the plaza floor, just below. The new piece of Stela 9 depicts a feathered crown, with extremely eroded hieroglyphic texts and iconography forming a border around this carving. The sides of the stela bear further hieroglyphic texts, in a better state of preservation, and these provide clues that suggest the stela may have been dedicated in A.D. 504, which would correspond with the stylistic dating of the lower section of Stela 9, previously estimated at ca. A.D. 500.



**Figure 5: The newly discovered upper section of Stela 9. Photo by Francisco Castañeda.**

### **STELA 9**

On the south side of the stairway excavators discovered fragments of a new Late Classic (A.D. 600-900) monument, Stela 43, embedded into the front and side walls of the terrace. These fragments comprise less than half of the original monuments and were deliberately trimmed before being set within a terrace of Structure M13-1's final construction phase. The fragments all come from the upper half of the monument, and include the torso and arms of a ruler holding a ceremonial bar, as well as considerable parts of a feathered headdress and part of the face of the ruler.



**Figure 6 Stela 43 showing main torso fragment *in situ*. Photo by Francisco Castañeda**



**Figure 7 Stela 43 upper fragment showing ear flare and part of the face, photo by Francisco Castañeda**

### **STELA 43**

Stela 43 has been examined by Freidel, Castañeda and project epigrapher, Stanley Guenter, and their analysis indicates that the stela dates to A.D. 702 and portrays a king, almost certainly K'inich Bahlam II, who ruled in the late seventh and early eight centuries. Unfortunately, K'inich Bahlam's name does not survive on any of the currently known fragments of this stela but he was the king ruling on this date. The dedicatory date of the stela in the ancient Maya calendar was 9.13.10.0.0, 7 Ahau 3 Cumku (20 January, 702) and commemorates the day 7 Ahau. Two earlier iterations of 7 Ahau were also commemorated in the text of Stela 43, including the katun endings 8.14.0.0.0, 7 Ahau 3 Xul (29 August, A.D. 317) and 9.7.0.0.0, 7 Ahau 3 Kankin (3 December, A.D. 573). The latter date is associated with a woman named Lady Ikoom and while she does not carry an Emblem Glyph on Stela 43, the reference to her on this monument suggests she may have been an earlier ruler of the site. The damaged inscription on the right

side of the stela is notable in that it describes the previously unknown accession date of the Calakmul king Yuhknoom Took' K'awiil, dating to 698. Given El Perú's relationship as a vassal kingdom of Calakmul, and K'inich Bahlam's marriage to a Calakmul princess, this reference to the accession of a new king of the Snake dynasty of Calakmul was an acknowledgment of both an overlord, as well as an in-law.

The possibility exists that Stela 43 may be the upper section of previously known Stela 8. As noted above, Stela 43 consists only of portions of the upper half of this monument portraying a male ruler, while Stela 8 consists only of a few small fragments of a monument, but the only identifiable carving depicts the legs of a Late Classic king. The king on Stela 43 faces to the right, and if this is the upper section of Stela 8 this king would have faced towards Stela 7, which was the central monument of three stelae that stood in front of the main staircase of Structure M13-1. Stela 7 was made of poor quality, friable limestone, and nothing remains on the pieces of this stela to indicate whether it was originally carved or not. While Stela 8 flanks Stela 7 to the north, to the south was Stela 6, excavated by Olivia Navarro Farr in 2005. Stela 6 is terribly eroded, but enough remains to identify a Late Classic portrait of a queen who faces towards the left; that is, towards Stela 7. If Stela 43 is the upper section of Stela 7 we would have two monuments, a king (to the left) and a queen (to the right) facing in towards Stela 7, standing in front of the main temple of El Perú-Waká. This triad of monuments finds a correspondence in Stelae 33, 34, and 35, standing on Plaza 1 in front of Structure M12-35. Stelae 33 and 34 were erected as a pair in A.D. 692 and portray K'inich Bahlam II (Stela 33, on the left) and his wife, Lady K'abel (Stela 34, on the right). The royal pair face each other, and in A.D. 711 Stela 35 was added to form a trio. This stela portrays a king, almost certainly K'inich Bahlam himself, facing to the left, towards Stela 34 in this new arrangement of these monuments as a trio. This has long suggested to project members that Lady K'abel may have passed away before 711, as 711 was the first Period Ending since before 672 for which there is no evidence that this couple commissioned a pair of monuments, and Stela 35 was clearly set up to face towards Stela 34, portraying this queen. If Stelae 8/43 and Stela 6 were set up as a pair this could reflect the death of Lady K'abel at some point between 702 and 711. This is speculation, however, and due to the extent of the erosion on Stela 6 we cannot even be certain that this monument portrays her. Even if it does, we must also consider the possibility of Stela 6 being a posthumous portrait, precedent for such a commemorative monument having already been found at El Perú in the form of Stela 24, dating to 761 and portraying a recently deceased king.

## **BURIAL 61**

Stelae 6, 7, and 8 were placed in front of the main staircase of Structure M13-1, and beneath this staircase excavations during the 2012 field season discovered Burial 61. Archaeologists Olivia Navarro Farr and Griselda Pérez discovered this tomb underneath later phases of a masonry shrine that had been placed on this staircase, the last of which was built after A.D. 750 in the post-royal period of the site's history. The last shrine, contemporary with the terrace walls described above, contained a monumental fire altar which had been dedicated by the sacrifice of a mature woman buried underneath it. Below that last shrine was a buried earlier version and it was below this earlier shrine that the royal tomb was found. This tomb contained the remains of a single mature individual who was buried with many rich offerings, including a number of ceramic vessels datable to the early to mid-eighth century AD (700-750), as well as



considerable amounts of jade jewelry, as well as perishable materials whose remains are currently under investigation. The most important offering relevant to the identification of the person in the tomb is a small alabaster jar carved as an effigy conch shell out of which emerges the head and arm of an aged individual.



**Figure 8: Burial 61 from the west. The queen's skull is above the plate fragments.**



**Figure 9: Olivia Navarro Farr and Griselda Pérez, excavators of Burial 61. Dr. Navarro Farr holds a greenstone figurine from the groin area of the queen.**



**Figure 10: The small conch-efigy alabaster vessel.**

The conch shell trumpet is the dwelling place of royal ancestors and gods in Classic Maya religion. The portrayed individual is a woman with a characteristic strand of hair in front of her ear. She is a mature person with a lined face. The vessel is white, and Classic Period royal funeral practice had a special place or object called a White Soul Flower (or seed) cache vessel. Two likely examples of this kind of special vessel were discovered in eighth century royal tombs at the site of Tikal. They are made of mosaic green jades, a material associated with breath and spirit. Like the jar in Burial 61 the small Tikal jars also have portraits of the ruler on them.

On the other side of the jar is a brief glyphic text that has been studied by project epigrapher Stanley Guenter.



**Figure 10: Drawing of the Glyphs on the back of the alabaster vessel, naming its owner as Lady Waterlily-Hand, Princess of Calakmul. Drawing by Stanley Guenter.**

The text consists of four hieroglyphs. The first one was inscribed half on the body of the alabaster vessel and half on its lid, and erosion patterns along the edge of the lid indicates that it saw considerable use before being deposited in the tomb. This use wear has badly damaged the first hieroglyph but enough remains to read it as *yotoot*, “the house of”, and the second glyph should refer to the original contents of the vessel. Unfortunately, while this glyph is perfectly preserved the unique characteristics of the second sign prevent a full reading of this glyph at present. Testing of the remains within the hollowed-out vessel may help in this identification.

The name of the owner of this alabaster vessel appear in the final two hieroglyphs of this text. The first is the personal name, and while this cannot be read full phonetically in the ancient Classic Mayan language, it can be translated as “Lady Waterlily-Hand”. The final glyph is a female version of the Calakmul Emblem Glyph, reading *Ix Kan Ajaw*, or “Lady Snake Lord” and identifying Lady Waterlily-Hand as a princess of Calakmul. This is almost certainly an alternative spelling of the name of Lady K’abel, as both names consist of hands holding waterlilies and both are titled as princesses of Calakmul. (“K’abel” is a nickname given to this lady as the only parts of her name on Stela 34 that can be read with confidence are the hand part, **K’AB**, as well as a **-le** suffix.) Lady K’abel appears on Stela 34 (see Figure 2, above) where she is associated with the date A.D. 692 and the Wak king, K’inich Bahlam II. The personal nature



of this alabaster vessel makes it likely that Burial 61 is that of Lady K'abel herself. Other ceramic vessels within the tomb present iconographic clues that suggest a date not more than a decade or two either side of the eighth century, which would further support the identification of this tomb with Lady K'abel.

Examination of the osteological remains by bioarchaeologist Erin Patterson indicated that the interred individual was a mature individual but deterioration of the bones did not permit a firm identification of this person as male or female. If female, the interred individual had more robust than gracile features, traits not inconsistent with the forceful portrait of Lady K'abel on Stela 34. One further clue favoring the identification of the deceased as a queen was the presence of a large red spiny oyster (*Spondylus* sp.) shell on the lower torso. Late Classic queens at Waka', including K'abel, regularly wore such a shell as a girdle ornament in their stela portraits while kings did not.

Burial 61 is a complex ritually charged deposit and its contents will take years to conserve and analyze. We started the research in 2012 intensely curious to know why this temple was the focus of such reverence and ritual attention for generations after the collapse of the Kan Empire and the fall of the dynasty at El Perú-Waka'. It is now clear to us that the golden age of the city, and the great queen and her husband who presided over it, were remembered and celebrated by ordinary people with their humble offerings and hopes of renewal in the future.