



# Glyph Dwellers

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## Possible Phonetic Substitutions for the "Knot-Head" Glyph

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For many decades the "knot-head" grapheme has been known to epigraphers due to its appearance in the Primary Standard Sequence (PSS) of many vases from the central and eastern Peten area of the Maya realm (**Fig. 1**). The sign itself depicts a human head in profile with a large knot superimposed over its eye. The knot resembles the cloth or paper headband used by ancient Maya elites during accession ceremonies.



**Fig. 1.** The "Knot-Head" grapheme from painted ceramic vessels K1547, 4572, and 1377. Drawings by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

In recent years, few scholars have ventured into an analysis of this sign. The most prominent cases would be Dorie Reents-Budet (1994:123, 4.13), who identified it in her book *Painting the Maya Universe*



as "ah-Knot Eye" and interpreted it sometimes as a name or title as well as *u-na'* "(it is) his knowledge" (1994:133, fig. 4.25). Erik Boot (2005) also studied this sign, proposing the reading of *hun* ("book"); however, later he qualified his interpretation: "In the past I suggested a logographic value HUN for the KNOT.EYE sign, based on the large knot (HUN) as well as the substitution with a sign that may represent a jaguar skin covered screenfold book (HUN) .... This sign also appears in inscriptions from northern Campeche (e.g. Xcalumkin) .... At present I am less convinced of this identification, as such I have chosen for the added query."

Because the "knot-head" grapheme sometimes occurs by itself and always in the same context, as a title, it is likely to be a logogram. However, because it does not appear with complete phonetic complements, it has up until now resisted transliteration and translation. Some examples are preceded by the agentive **AJ**. However, Maya scribes generally wrote the sign alone, or preceded by an **u** syllable. The evidence that **u** in this case is not a third person pronoun but phonetic complement can be found on Kerr 3412, where we have *u-KNOT.HEAD aj laatz*. Because in other inscriptions (K532, K1377, K1485, K1547, K4572, K7459, K7460) the *aj laatz* title occurs directly before "knot-head", the **u** must be a phonetic complement. In addition, K4572 and K7459 have *u-KNOT.HEAD chehe'n*, whereas K1256 and K5453 contain the same phrase but without **u** in front of the "knot-head" glyph. All of these examples confirm the grapheme in question is a logogram that begins with *u-*.

Despite these difficulties with decipherment, we have identified two unique examples of a possible phonetic substitution for this grapheme in a repetitive context. The first example appears on a vase first described by Raphael Tunesi (2008) that represents a gift-giving scene with God D and a dwarf. The PSS is part of a regional tradition of dedication texts which normally include the initial sign *alay* ("here") followed by a dedicatory verbal expression using the Maize God head plus **la** and **ja**. After these glyphs we find the expression *utz'ihbaal yuk'ib* ("his painted drinking vessel") and a description of the contents of this vase: *ta iximte'l kakaw* ("for *iximte'* cacao"). After this general information about the vase and its use, we read about the owner: *ch'ok u'b chehe'n itz'aat Ch'e'nal Te'/Ch'e'n Te' Nal* ("the youth *u'b*, so I say, the sage/artist, Cave Place Tree/Cave Tree Place") (Fig. 2). Of special interest is the collocation **u-ba**, which is in the exact position where in comparable PSS texts we would find the "knot-head" glyph. For example, on a similar vase, Kerr 5453, we find a text that shares the syntactic structure of the first vase and ends with the glyphs: *chak ch'ok KNOT.HEAD chehe'n itz'aat aj Ihk' Tuun* ("the great youth *u'b*, so I say, the sage/artist, he of Black Stone") (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 2.** U-ba replacing the "knot-head" grapheme in the title sequence from a vase in a private collection. Detail of rollout photograph by Raphael Tunesi.



**Fig. 3.** The "knot-head" grapheme in the title sequence from a polychrome vessel. Detail of rollout photograph, courtesy of Justin Kerr (K5453).

Another intriguing possibility of direct substitution comes from a carved vase, Kerr 8119, in the Chochola style (**Fig. 4**). The text again contains a predictable dedication formula that states: *alay k'ahlaj(?) yuxulil ujaay chak ch'ok kele'm uub che'e'n/chehe'n* ("Here it is dedicated the carving of his bowl, the great youth, the strong one, *uub*, so I say." Therefore we have two possible phonetic substitutions for "knot-head" sign: **u-ba** and **u-bi** which give us the readings **U'B/UUB**.



**Fig. 4.** U-bi replacing the "Knot-head" grapheme in the title sequence from a carved vessel (B4). Photograph courtesy of Justin Kerr (K8119).

One of the possible clues for a transitions of the word *u'b/uub* can be found in Lowland Mayan dictionaries with the verbal root *ub* "to listen":

Ch'ol: *ubin* "vt 1. escuchar 2. sentir" (Aulie, W. de Aulie, and Scharfe de Stairs 1998:134)

Ch'orti: *ub'in* "vt oír, escuchar, consultar, tratar" (Pérez Martínez et al. 1996:235)

Ch'olti: *ubi* "to hear, oír" (Robertson, Law, and Haertel 2010:337)

Yukatek: *u'b* "oír, entender;" *ah u'bah t'an* "oidor, el que oye lo que hablan, escuchador"  
(Barrera Vásquez, Bastarrachea Manzano, and Brito Sansores 1980:896)

Itzaj: *ub'* "oír, hear" (Hofling 1997:647)

Mopan: *ubi* "(vi) sentir, escuchar, saborear, averiguar" (Ulrich and Dixon de Ulrich 1976:229)

A confirmed use of the verb *ub* for hearing can be found at Palenque in a text carved on a jade earspool, where it appears as *ubijiy/ubujiy* "heard" (**Fig. 5**).



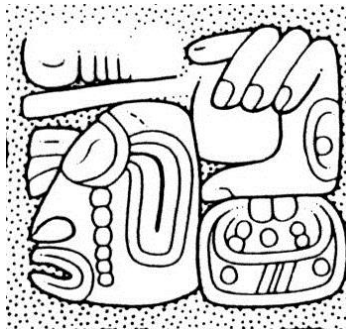
Fig. 5. U-bu-ji-ya *ubijiiy/ubujiiy* "heard," from Palenque jade earspool. Drawing by Yuriy Polyukhovych.



Fig. 6. Engraved bone spatula from Altar de Sacrificios. Drawing by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

Another important clue to the grammatical nature of the "knot-head" glyph comes from a delicately incised bone spatula from Altar de Sacrificios (**Fig. 6**). This short text can be read as: **[u] ja-chi-ji ba KUK? OOK-ki U'B**, *ujachij baak Kuk? Ook u'b*, "it is the engraved bone of Kuk? Ook, *u'b*".<sup>1</sup> The importance of this text for us is that the "knot-head" glyph is the last collocation after the name of the owner of the bone. This leaves no doubt that the "knot-head" is a title.

In conclusion, the "knot-head" grapheme works as a title with the possible meaning of "he who listens" in a fashion similar to the Spanish "oidor." This can be tentatively interpreted as a person who listens to claims, litigation, complaints, and the like. Of special importance is also a Yucatek variant mentioned in the Cordemex dictionary: *ah u'bah t'an* "oidor, el que oye lo que hablan, escuchador," cited above. This seems to echo the Classic-period collocation found in Xcalumkin column 1 (block B4) and spelled with the "knot-head" grapheme: **AJ U'B** (**Fig. 7**).



**Fig. 7.** AJ U'B title, Xcalumkin Column 1 (B4) (after Graham and von Euw 1992:4.173).

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<sup>1</sup> On the reading of T569 as **KUK**, see Beliaev and de León (2013:45).



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