



# Glyph Dwellers

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## Textual and Iconographic Parallels of the "Pile of Rabbits" Vessel at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Matthew Looper  
Yuriy Polyukhovych

Department of Art and Art History, California State University Chico

Ever since Michael Coe's pioneering work on Maya ceramic art in the 1970s, scholars have been aware of parallel imagery appearing on diverse vessels, often rendered by different artists or in different styles (see Coe 1973, 1978, 1982, 1989; Hellmuth 1982, 1987; Robicsek and Hales 1981; Taube 1985). With more recent progress in the decipherment of the hieroglyphic texts that accompany these scenes, it has become apparent that certain myths were widespread in the Maya area. Either copied directly from hieroglyphic books or adapted from the images painted on vessels that were traded between centers, Maya artists reveled in telling essentially the same story in slightly different ways. By comparing multiple vessels dating to the Late Classic period (650-800 CE) that recount related narratives, we are able to flesh out some of the details of these important myths.

An important example of such a story appears on a small cylinder vessel (**Figs. 1-4**; Los Angeles County Museum of Art M.2010.115.660; no. 2026 in the Kerr vase database [Kerr n.d.]). This piece features an unusual image of a pile of rabbits. What is the significance of this motif and how is its content expressed in its inscriptions?



**Fig. 1.** Polychrome vessel. Los Angeles County Museum of Art M.2010.115.660. Photograph by Yuriy Polyukhovych.





Fig. 2. Polychrome vessel. Los Angeles County Museum of Art M.2010.115.660. Photograph by Yuriy Polyukhovych.





Fig. 3. Polychrome vessel. Los Angeles County Museum of Art M.2010.115.660. Photograph by Yuriy Polyukhovych.





**Fig. 4.** Polychrome vessel. Los Angeles County Museum of Art M.2010.115.660. Photograph by Yuriy Polyukhovych.



The Primary Standard Sequence or Dedicatory Formula of the LACMA vessel consists of the initial sign *alay*, "here," followed by the "skull" form of the dedication verb. Next is *utz'ihbnajal yuk'ib ta tzih* "the painting of his drinking vessel for *tzih*," probably referring to a beverage that this vessel was designed to hold. Following this is the name of the owner, K'inich Paskab, then **a-lu**, possibly also part of the personal name or a title, an eroded sign, and then the "knot-head" title, possibly reading *u'b* "he who listens" (Tunesi and Polyukhovych 2016). The appearance of the "knot-head" title, together with the phonetic spelling of *utz'ihbnajal* and the painting style of this vessel suggest a possible attribution of the vase to the Xultun region of Peten, Guatemala (see Matteo and Krempel 2010).

The two captions of the main scene fill in the space between the dominant figures on two sides of the vessel. The first of these, *o'n t'ul ma' o'n wa'k' yalajiy juun ajaw ti itzam kokaaj* has already been partly discussed by epigraphers (Houston, Robertson, and Stuart 2001:4-5, fig. 2a). It is a record of direct speech, followed by a quotative statement: "There are many rabbits [but] not many *wa'k'* said Juun Ajaw to Itzam Kokaaj." While the first part of the sentence obviously refers to the pile of rabbits positioned beneath the caption, the second part is more difficult to interpret. Possibly referring to the peculiar long-necked bird with a long wattle held by the figure on the left (logically, the Hero Twin Juun Ajaw), *wa'k'* does not correspond to a particular bird species that we have been able to identify in available dictionaries, though the same bird may appear on a few other ancient Maya vessels, such as Kerr 2668 (Raphael Tunesi, pers. comm. 2016). The only dictionary entry we could locate that may provide a clue for translating this term is Yukatek *wak'al* "manada o rebaño" (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980:909). So Juun Ajaw may be saying, "There are many rabbits, but not a herd." At any rate, this is the content of the speech directed by Juun Ajaw toward Itzam Kokaaj, the youthful form of the reigning god shown seated on the dais before him. Itzam Kokaaj sniffs a bouquet and gazes into a mirror, which indicates a luxurious lifestyle, typical for gods.

Complementing the record of Juun Ajaw's speech to Itzam Kokaaj is the second event. It shows a dwarf giving a bird to Itzam Kokaaj, a mythical event discussed by Tunesi (2008). The caption that accompanies the dwarf on the LACMA vessel begins with *alay* "here" in an important context outside of the Dedicatory Formula. Next is *utz* "good," and then *iwataal*, interpreted by Krempel and Davletshin in another context (see below) as "your payment," and then *utz* once again. So this quotation is saying "here, your payment is good, [really] good." Next is the quotative *yalajiy*, and then a two eroded blocks which seem to have been partially retouched by a restorer. These blocks should have referred to the seated hunchback. The content of the second caption helps us to understand that the first caption, which comments on the relative quantities of animals, is actually part of a tribute or offering scene, a well-known theme in Maya art and texts (see Miller and Brittenham 2013:155; Stuart 1995:358). While some images, such as the murals in Bonampak Room 1, depict historical individuals making or receiving tribute payments, images such as that which appears on the LACMA vessel provide a mythical analogue that probably legitimated the political hierarchy and the role of tribute payment within it.

Parallel texts on other vessels contain additional elements that the Maya understood to be part of the mythic narratives of tribute payment. Perhaps the most elaborate of these is that which appears on Kerr 7727 (Fig. 5; Princeton University Art Museum 2005-127). In fact, we observe that one of the captions on K7727 is almost identical to the second caption on the LACMA vessel. Again, in association with the image of a dwarf offering birds to Itzam Kokaaj (this time aged), we see the caption "here, your payment is good, [really] good;" however, in this case, it is attributed directly to Itzam Kokaaj (Krempel and Davletshin 2014:38-39). Juun Ajaw also appears on K7727, where his name is given as "Juun Pu'w" ("One Blowgunner"). He stands at the far left-hand side of the rollout, adjusting the stone balanced on



the head of what seems to be an already overloaded frog, toad, turtle, or other reptile carrying a huge merchant's pack. The caption in front of Juun Ajaw's face contains the term *yikaatz* "his cargo," which refers to this burden (see Just 2009:13). The prominent merchant's pack on K7727 seems to reinforce the content of at least part of this image as involving mythic payment of goods to Itzam Kokaaj.



**Fig. 5.** Polychrome vessel. Princeton University Art Museum 2005-127. Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr (K7727).

Images of dwarfs offering birds to Itzam Kokaaj appear on other vessels. Raphael Tunesi (2008), who first explored this theme in Maya ceramic art, published one of these works, which shows the youthful deity receiving a bird from a dwarf (**Fig. 6**). As Tunesi (2008:18) noted, on this vessel, Itzam Kokaaj rests his elbow on a bundle of cacao beans, an important tribute item. The caption on this vessel is almost identical to that of K7727 (Tunesi 2008; Krempel and Davletshin 2014:38–39).



**Fig. 6.** Polychrome vessel. Private collection. Rollout photograph by Raphael Tunesi.





On yet another vessel (**Fig. 7**; de Young Museum, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco 2013.48.1; Kerr 4999), we see once again, on the left-hand side, a dwarf offering a bird to the youthful Itzam Kokaaj. The caption of this scene is difficult to read completely, but begins with a compound that includes *tuun* "stone," then *yu-tzi*. The significance of these two blocks is unclear. Nevertheless, what follows is the familiar *uutz yalajiiy itzam kokaaj* "...is good, said Itzam Kokaaj." Interestingly, in this case, the final block of the caption has the preposition *ti* "to" followed by two eroded graphemes. This must have indicated the personage to whom Itzam Kokaaj was speaking, i.e. the dwarf.



**Fig. 7.** Polychrome vessel. de Young Museum, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco 2013.48.1 (K4999). Photographs by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

The companion scene on K4999 shows a gopher serving a beverage to the aged Itzam Kokaaj. The caption reads *ch'aj ...yalajiiy baah [ti itzam kokaaj]* "pinole ...said the gopher [to Itzam Kokaaj]." This example is particularly interesting, as it suggests yet another aspect of the myth of offering tribute to Itzam Kokaaj, this time involving a beverage made of roasted corn, possibly mixed with other ingredients. It calls to mind the famous "Hummingbird Vase" excavated from Burial 196 at Tikal (**Fig. 8**; Miscellaneous Text 176; Kerr 8008). Here, we see two hummingbird deities seated before youthful Itzam Kokaaj figures. The first caption reads: *ma' xupu/xup chan ch'aj awichnal wawaal? yalajiiy tz'unun ti itzam kokaaj* "don't deplete it/it is never depleted, the celestial pinole before you ?, said the hummingbird to Itzam Kokaaj." The second caption is rather different and mentions an unidentified substance perhaps called *ahib*. It reads: *ch'aj upaskab yahib? yochel k'in yalajiiy tz'unun ti itzam kokaaj* "pinole is its dawn; *ahib*(?) is its dusk (or "pinole is at dawn; *ahib*(?) is at dusk"), said the hummingbird to



Itzam Kokaaj.” Perhaps this scene shows the hummingbird explaining the daily regimen of foods to Itzam Kokaaj.



Fig. 8. Polychrome vessel, Tikal Burial 196. Miscellaneous Text 176. Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr (K8008).

Yet another related inscription appears on the underside of an alabaster vessel from the Copan area in the Princeton University Art Museum (2002.370), which reads *ch'aj ... yalajiy... itzam kokaaj* “pinole ... he said ... Itzam Kokaaj” (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Underside of incised alabaster vessel, Princeton Art Museum 2002.370. Photograph by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

Images of animals offering foodstuffs to Itzam Kokaaj appear with considerable frequency in Maya art. One of the most elaborate of these is the polychrome cylinder vessel Kerr 3413, which shows a number of animals assembled before a stairway or stepped platform, offering drinking vessels and plates heaped with tamales to Itzam Kokaaj, who reclines on the upper level of the platform (**Fig. 10**; Raphael Tunesi, pers. comm. 2016). The gopher with his beverage offering is present, as are the Hero Twins, dressed in jaguar pelts and holding blowguns. Monkey scribes below dutifully transcribe the event, thereby providing a mythical template for the transmission of this story to the artist who painted the vase. Although these texts and images are not fully understood, their content underscores the importance of pinole, along with other foods, as mythic tribute offerings to Itzam Kokaaj by various animals accompanied by the Hero Twins.



**Fig. 10.** Polychrome vessel. Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr (K3413).

This brings us to an incised vessel, Kerr 8076, where we have a dwarf standing before a reclining woman (**Fig. 11**). The inscription associated with this scene again mentions pinole, *ch'aj*, followed by three difficult blocks, and then *yalajiiy son*, "said the dwarf" (see Polyukhovych 2009). The complementary scene shows a coati seated before the youthful Itzam Kokaaj. The caption reads *mih o'n patan yalajiiy tz'utz'ih* "There is not much tribute, said the coati" (Houston, Robertson, and Stuart 2001:4–5, fig. 2b). Thus, we see the dwarf making a comment about pinole as part of a mythic narrative that explicitly involves tribute assessment.





Fig. 11. Incised vessel (details). Photograph by Justin Kerr (K8076).



Viewed together with a selection of relevant vessels, we can make an argument that the scene in which rabbits are piled before Itzam Kokaaj on the LACMA vase M.2010.115.660 (K2026) is part of a myth of tribute presentation. In this story, a dwarf, Juun Ajaw, or an animal offers pinole, cacao, birds, or rabbits to Itzam Kokaaj. As suggested by Raphael Tunesi (pers. comm. 2016), perhaps in this image, the god Juun Ajaw is striking a bargain with Itzam Kokaaj, explaining that his bird is rare and beautiful, and thus of equal or greater value compared to the large number of rabbits already heaped before him. Because these narratives appear on vessels executed in a variety of techniques and styles, we may conclude that the stories were quite widespread, almost certainly written down in books that were widely available to Maya courts (see Coe 1973; Kubler 1984:279–280). Differences in the characters and details expressed in these images and texts imply that there was significant variation in narratives from site to site. Without a doubt, the popularity of these scenes on courtly ceramics was tied to the importance of actual tribute rituals, which enhanced the wealth and prestige of ancient Maya courts. The frequent appearance of these scenes on drinking vessels also provided a mythic counterpart to the consumption of cacao and other beverages by the Maya elite.



**Table 1.** Inscription from Los Angeles County Museum of Art M.2010.115.660 (K2026). Photographs by Yuriy Polyukhovych.



A      **a-LAY-ya**      alay      here



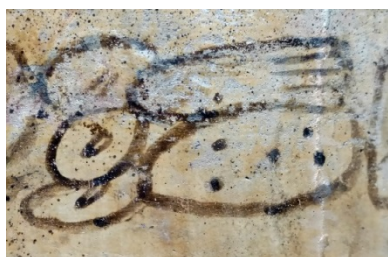
B      ?      ?      ? ["skull" dedication verb]



C      **u-tz'i-bi-**      utz'ihbnajal      its painting



D      **-na-ja-la**      "      "



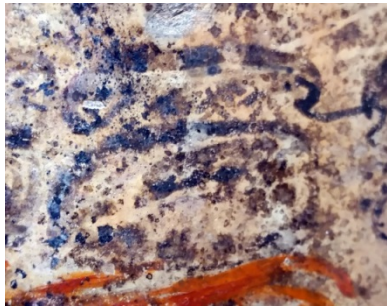
E      **yu-k'i-bi**      yuk'ib      his drinking vessel



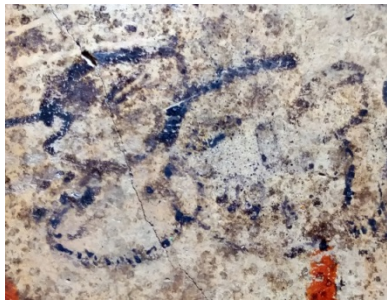
F      **ta tzi-hi**      ta tzih      for fresh (drink)?



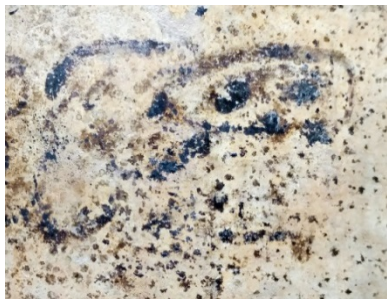
G      **K'INICH PAS**      k'inich pas      K'inich Pas



H      **ka-ba**      kab      Kab



I      **a-lu**      ?      ?



J      **a-**      -      -





K

**U'B**

u'b

listener



L1

**o-na**

o'n

many



M1

**T'UL**

t'ul

rabbits



N1

**ma o-na**

ma' o'n

not many



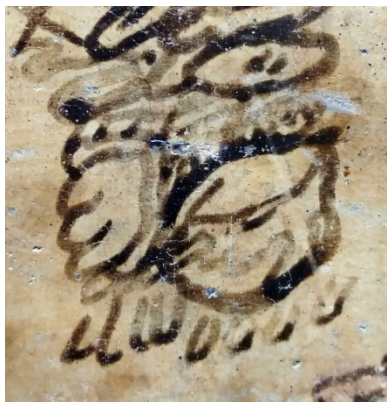
O1      wa-k'u      wa'k'      ?



P1      ya-la-ji-ya      yalajiiy      he said (it)



P2      1 AJAW-wa      juun ajaw      Juun Ajaw



P3      ti ITZAM      ti Itzam      to Itzam Kokaaj  
KOK/KOKAAJ      Kokaaj  
-ji



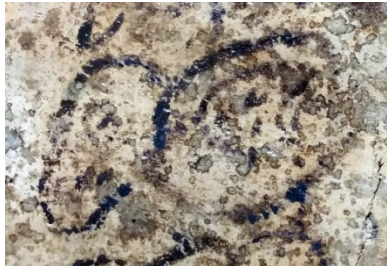


Q1

**a-LAY-ya**

alay

here



Q2

**u-tzi**

uutz

it is good



Q3

**i-wa-ta-li**

iwataal

your payment?



R1

**u-tzi**

uutz

it is good



S1

ya-la-ji-ya

yalajiiy

he said



T1

—

—

—



U1

—

—

—

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