



Glyph Dwellers

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A Royal Vase from La Corona in the Art Institute of Chicago

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The outstanding collection of ancient Maya objects in the Art Institute of Chicago includes such famous and well published vessels as the “Holmul Dancer” vase K633 (1986.1081), the so-called “Aj Maxam” vase K635 (1986.1080), and a Chocholá carved vase 1969.241, published in *The Maya Scribe and His World*, by Michael Coe (Coe 1973: 121, no. 61). Another object in this collection is a beautifully painted red-on-cream vase with black lines defining the rim and base (2009.735; **Figs. 1, 2**; McNear 1982: 18–19; Townsend 1983: 39, Fig. 63; Townsend and Pope 2016: 201, cat. 158). In 2007, Polyukhovych, together with Joel Palka and Jeff Buechler, examined the vase. Polyukhovych later drew the vessel’s inscription, based on photographs he took during this visit (**Fig. 3**). Later, in 2018, Looper reexamined and photographed the vase.

The imagery of this vase is the same on the front and the back, featuring a spotted deity with a headband, deer antler, and deer ear. In one hand he holds a conch shell, while his other arm is slung over a bundle or throne marked with the head of the Starry Deer Alligator, an important Maya celestial symbol (see Taube 1988: 344–345, Fig. 12.16b). The youthful god merges characteristics of the youthful Maize-Deer Gods depicted on the so-called “Dying God” vases and God S (see Beliaev and Davletshin 2006: 31–33; Boot 1989; Braakhuis 2001; Robicsek and Hales 1981: 39, vessels 14-16; Zender 2017). His appearance with the deity-bundle on this vase is unique, probably relating to an unknown myth.



Fig. 1. Vase 2009.735, The Art Institute of Chicago, 16.5 x 11.4 cm (6 1/2 x 4 1/2 in.). Photo by Matthew Loooper.

The inscription of the vase is fully identifiable (if not readable) and reveals important information regarding the intended patron of the vessel (**Tab. 1**). It begins with the *alay tz'ihbnaj jich yuk'ib ta tzih* sequence typical of vessels in this style, referring to the dedication of the vessel. Following this are the titles and personal name of the owner of the vase. First, at G-I is a variant of the “three-axe-over-earth” title seen elsewhere in the Maya script, for example at La Corona and on the Palenque Palace Tablet. Following this is the owner’s proper name, beginning with the head of the Tonsured Maize God prefixed by an knot-like element. One possible interpretation is that this is an elaboration of the deity’s forehead jewel (block J) and that the entire block represents the numeral “one” (**JU’N**) in the form of the Maize God (see Houston et al. 2017). Alternatively, the knot-like element on the left side of the block might be T60 **HU’N**, in which case the adjacent Maize God head would be the syllabic complement **na**. In some inscriptions, such as the Itzamnaj Court Vase (Coe and Houston 2015:plate XVIII), T60 is used to represent the numeral “one.” Following this, in block K is the skull-leaf grapheme that functions as **CHAK**, most often appearing on ceramics, plus **wa** (K) (see **Fig. 4**). At L is **na-bi**, spelling *naahb*. Next, at



M, is **CHAN**. A **nu** complement to this logograph probably indicates *cha'n* or *chaan*. Finally, at M, is the title **SAK WAHY**, a shorthand spelling of *sak wahyis*, a title seen frequently on ceramics, particularly in the “codex style,” as well as on monuments from sites such as Tikal, Calakmul, El Zotz, Uxul, and especially La Corona. The vessel’s owner is therefore stated to be Ju’n Chakaw Naahb Cha’n. This person is often known as “Chakaw Nahb Chan” and was the ruler of the site of La Corona, Guatemala from 658 to 667 CE (see Baron 2016:124, 142–151; Stuart et al. 2014:438–349). A structural comparison of his name with other variants shows the correspondence between the various elements of this ruler’s title and name (**Tab. 2**; see also Schele and Grube 1994: 127).



Fig. 2. Vase 2009.735, The Art Institute of Chicago, 16.5 x 11.4 cm (6 1/2 x 4 1/2 in.). Photo by Matthew Looper.

The inscription of this vessel is noteworthy for several reasons. First is its elegant calligraphic style, which owes much to the traditions of “codex-style” ceramics of Calakmul, with which the La Corona rulers maintained intimate dynastic connections during the seventh and early eighth centuries (García Barrios 2011; Guenter 2005; Martin 2008; Schele and Grube 1994:128–129). Second is that it represents

a highly elaborated version of the ruler’s names and titles, as opposed to the compressed examples that sometimes appear in monumental art. Third, it suggests a likely dating of this vessel between the birth of Ju’n Chakaw Naahb Cha’n in 615 and 667, when he died. The most likely range of dates is between his coronation in 658 and his death in 667.

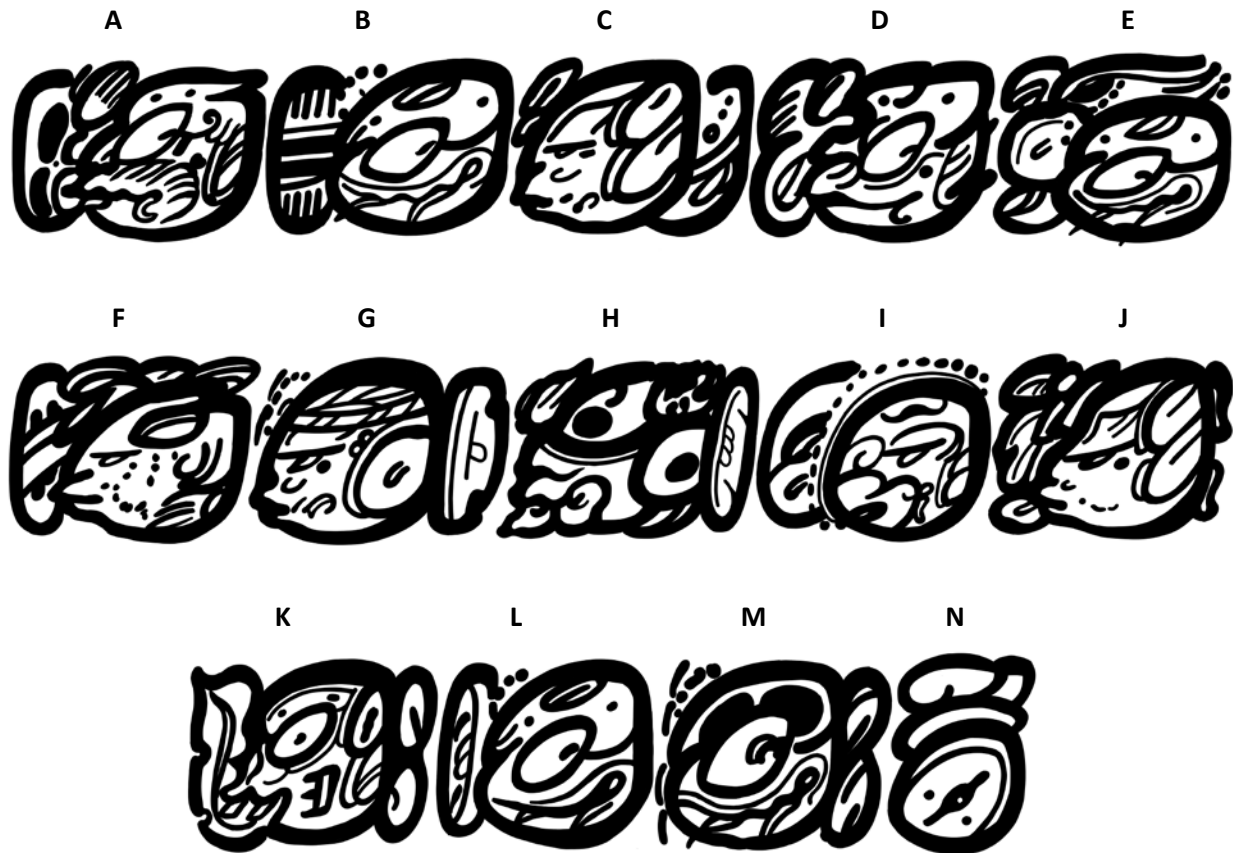




Fig. 3. Inscription of vase 2009.735, The Art Institute of Chicago. Drawing by Yuriy Polyukhovych.



Fig. 4. Comparison of CHAK graphemes from Kerr 3026 (left) and Vase 2009.735, The Art Institute of Chicago (right). Drawings by Matthew Loooper and Yuriy Polyukhovych.

Table 1. Inscription from vase 2009.735, Art Institute of Chicago. Photographs by Matthew Looper.

| | | | | |
|---|---|------------------|-----------|---------------------|
|  | A | a-AL | alay | here |
|  | B | tz'i-bi | tz'ihbnaj | is painted |
|  | C | na-ja | “ | “ |
|  | D | ji-chi | jich? | the surface? |
|  | E | yu-k'i-bi | yuk'ib | his drinking vessel |



F **ta tzi-hi** ta tzih for *tzih* [beverage]



G **HUX** hux three-



H **?-na** ? ?



I **CHIIT K'UH** chiit k'uh ? god



J **HU'N-na / JU'N** ju'n Ju'n



K **CHAK-wa** chakaw Chakaw



L

na-bi

naahb

Naahb



M

CHAN-nu

cha'n / chaan

Cha'n



N

SAK WAHY

sak wahyis

Sak Wahyis



Table 2. Structural analysis of name and titles of Ju'n Chakaw Naahb Cha'n of La Corona. Row 1: Art Institute of Chicago vase 2009.735; Row 2: Site Q Panel 1; Row 3: Site Q Panel 3; Row 4: La Corona Element 33; Row 5: Site Q Panel 4; Row 6: La Corona Panel 1; Row 7: Site Q Panel 2. Row 1 drawing by Yuriy Polyukhovych; Row 2 by William Ringle; Row 3 by Nikolai Grube; Row 4 by Philip Galeev, and Rows 5-7 by David Stuart.

| | HUX | ?(-na) | CHIIT(-ta) K'UH | HU'N-na /JU'N | CHAK(-wa) | na-bi / NAAHB (-bi) | CHAN(-nu) |
|---|-----|--------|--------------------|------------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------|
| 1 | | | | | | | |
| 2 | | | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | | | | |
| 4 | | | | | | | |
| 5 | | | | | | | |
| 6 | | | | | | | |
| 7 | | | | | | | |

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