



Glyph Dwellers

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A Plate in the Utah Museum of Fine Arts with an Unusual /ba/ Grapheme

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Among several inscribed Maya vessels held in the Utah Museum of Fine Arts in Salt Lake City is a Late Classic painted plate with the accession number UMFA1979.269 (**Fig. 1, 2, Table 1**). The center of the plate is decorated with an image of a supernatural creature combining the head and plume-like fins of a fish with an elongated serpent body. Similar creatures appear elsewhere in Maya ceramics, such as the El Zotz-style plate in the Nasher Art Museum, Duke University (1978.40.1) (K5460; Reents-Budet 1994:281). The palette and calligraphic style of the Utah plate, however, is typical of the northern Peten or southern Campeche region.

The dedicatory inscription painted around the rim of the plate is fully readable and confirms an association with the northern Peten/southern Campeche area. The tail of the fish-serpent points to the introductory sign, *alay* (A). Following this is the dedication verb *tz'ihbnajich*, "it gets painted", written from B-E. In a typical dedicatory sequence, the next collocation would be *utz'ihbaal* "its painting," and on the plate we see the "xok" variant of **u** at F, followed by the "bat" **tz'i** at G, an unusual combination of signs at H, and the "vulture" **li** at I. Block H consists of several parts. The superfix seems to be the T60g/145e "knot" **hi**, while the main sign is T501 "imix" **ba**. The elongated postfix might be T258 **tz'i**. While it might be the case that the entire block is simply a T501 **ba** with decorative additions, another interpretation is that each element is actually a distinct grapheme, possibly reading **tz'i-hi-ba**. In this case, the **tz'i** would repeat the syllable provided in block G (a common occurrence), and the **hi** would be

providing evidence for the [h] in *tz'ihb*. This would be equivalent to the presence of **hi** in a spelling of **k'in-ni-hi-chi**, *k'ihnich* (Lacadena and Wichmann 2004:147).



Fig. 1. Guatemala, possibly northern Petén region, Maya culture, Plate with Jaguar/Serpent/Bird Motif, 600-900, earthenware and pigment. Purchased with funds from Friends of the Art Museum, from the Permanent Collection of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts. UMFA1979.269. [caption provided by UMFA]



Fig. 2. Plate, Utah Museum of Fine Arts UMFA1979.269. Drawing by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

The next three blocks J, K, and L spell out *ulak*, "his plate," and the name of the owner is next at M-N. This consists of **K'AHK'-OHL** at position M and the "deer-hoof-skull" variant of **KAM**. The name of the owner is therefore K'ahk' Ohl Kamay, which is the same as that of a *wahy* (spirit of death and disease) that appears on numerous vessels (e.g. K1256, K1389, K1646, K1652, Denver Art Museum 1988.424, Fralin Museum of Art 1980.56.2, Princeton University Art Museum y1994-11). Finishing out the inscription are two titles, beginning with *k'uhul chatahn winik*, at O-Q, which refers to a divine person from the site of Chatahn. Examples of this title also appear on monuments mainly from Calakmul but much more frequently on "codex style" ceramics produced either at Tintal or in the southern El Mirador

Basin generally (Martin 2020:403-404, n. 19; see also Boot 2005:505–516; Boucher 2012, 2014; Boucher and Palomo 2012; García Barrios and Velásquez García 2016; Grube 2004:122; Reents-Budet and Bishop 1987; Reents-Budet et al. 2011). Finally is the title *sak wahyis*, at R. This title is of uncertain meaning, but is associated with rulers at La Corona and Uxul, both client sites of Calakmul (Grube et al. 2012; Martin 2020:333).

A plate from Justin Kerr's archive (K3876) features a text that is closely parallel to that of the Utah plate (Fig. 3). Although it is executed in a similar palette, the two plates seem to be painted by different artists. The inscription of K3876 begins with the initial sign, *alay*, here spelled with the head of the god GI rather than the more common mirror grapheme, as on the Utah plate. The dedication verb is also different, consisting of a "sun-in-hand" grapheme **K'AL** followed by **ja**, yielding *k'ahlaj* "it is made." The next four blocks (C-F) are intended to be *utz'ihbaal*, but are written out of order and with repeated and somewhat distorted graphemes: **u-ba-u-tz'i(?)**. Next at G-H is *ulak*, "his plate," followed by a set of titles at I-K: *chak ch'ok keleem* "great youth, young male." Finally, we see the same name that appears on the Utah plate: K'ahk' Ohl Kamay, at L-M. While this may be a namesake, it is also quite likely that the two plates refer to the same person and that the owner of the Utah plate was also a "great youth, young male." The inscription of K3876 concludes with the same sequence that appears on the Utah plate: *k'uhul chatahn winik sak wahyis* (N-Q).



Fig. 3. Plate. Photograph by Justin Kerr (K3876).



There is also a possible relationship between the Utah plate and a vase in the Kerr archive, K8526 (Fig. 4). Although the image features a complex court scene (probably a first bloodletting ceremony by a youth) and the glyphs include white accents, we can see that the dedication sequence has many elements in common with the two plates already discussed, including the title sequence *k'uhul chatahn winik sak wahyis*. The name of the person who bears these titles is partially damaged, but does include the "deer-hoof-skull" **KAM** grapheme seen on the plates.








Fig. 4. Vase. Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr (K8526).






Table 1. Inscription from plate 1979.269, Utah Museum of Fine Arts. Drawings by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

	A	a-AL-ya	alay	here
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	B	tz'i-bi	tz'ihbnajich	it gets painted
	C	na-ja	"	"
	D	ji	"	"
	E	chi	"	"
	F	u	utz'ihbaal	its painting



	G	tz'i	"	"
	H	tz'i?-hi?-ba	"	"
	I	li	"	"
	J	u	ulak	his plate
	K	la	"	"



	L	ka	"	"
	M	K'AHK'-OHL	k'ahk' ohl	K'ahk' Ohl
	N	KAM	kamay	Kamay
	O	K'UH	k'uhul	holy
	P	cha-TAHN-na	chatahn	Chatahn



	Q	wi-WINIK	winik	person
	R	SAK-WAHY	sak wahyis	Sak Wahyis

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