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A Bowl Fit for a King: A Ceramic Vessel of the Naranjo Court Bearing the Komkom Emblem Glyph

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The Maya Ceramics Project (formerly the Maya Survey Project), now centered at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, has as its primary focus the sampling and documentation of the chemical composition of ancient Maya decorated ceramics from a wide array of sites and collections throughout the Maya lowlands (for discussions of the INAA analytical technique, see Bishop et al. 1982; Blackman and Bishop 2007). This project combines nuclear chemistry, archaeology, and art history to investigate the socio-historical implications of Classic Maya (AD 250–850) painted ceramics. The sampling program began in the 1970s and continues as an opportunistic patchwork of chemical analyses with the collaboration of many colleagues and institutions. Project objectives include the production of a pottery paste compositional survey of ceramic production in Mesoamerica with a special emphasis on the Maya region. The compositional data allow the discerning of compositionally and stylistically similar sherds and whole vessels, which imply their being made from similar clay resources and ceramic recipes as well as being viewed as the products of a specific area, site, and perhaps even a group of aligned artisans and/or workshop(s) (Bishop et al. 1986; Reents and Bishop 1985, 2003). The ultimate goal is the detection of patterns of use and exchange to shed light on ancient sociopolitical and economic interaction in Mesoamerica and especially among the Maya.

The Maya Ceramics Project was operating in Guatemala in 1993 at which point a pottery bowl in a private collection was brought to the attention of Ronald L. Bishop, which was promptly sampled and attributed the analytical number MS5331. This same bowl is now part of the Palacios-Weyman Collection that is managed by the Fundación para la Bellas Artes y la Cultura (FUNBA) in La Antigua, Guatemala. The FUNBA curates 4,000 pieces from the collections of the architect Amelia Weymann de Palacios (née Weymann Tejeda) and José María Palacios Porta, lawyer by profession. On account of their shared interest in history and culture, the Palacios-Weyman Collection was started at a very early date and enriched over five decades, until it grew to its current size, becoming one of the most important collections of Guatemalan art. The Palacios-Weymann Collection, which has been registered as national patrimony by the Guatemalan government’s Institute of Anthropology, Ethnology and History (IDAEH), covers three major periods: namely, a) Prehispanic, b) Colonial and Hispano-Guatemalan, as well as c) modern and contemporary.

Below we provide a description of this remarkable bowl, its physical properties, and iconography, but we will focus mostly on the chemical attributes and the paleographic features of the glyphic text that adorns the vessel, in order to consider the interplay of these two distinct lines of evidence and how they shed light on the socioeconomic and historical context of its manufacture.

Physical Properties and Chemical Analyses

The vessel is registered as 84-A-5-311-1 in the Palacios-Weyman collection. The shape of the vessel is that of a bowl according to the archaeological shape-typology for Maya ceramics (Sabloff 1975:23-24) with a flat bottom and outsloping walls. Its maximal rim diameter is 20 cm.
The Holmul style, first defined at the site of Holmul, Guatemala (Merwin and Valliant 1932; Reents 1985). The Holmul pottery style features a cream-white base slip and painted imagery using shades of red, particularly a red outline and orange interior wash, the wash perhaps a dilution of the red slip. An unusual feature of MS5331 is the replacement of a deep black slip for image accents— as is typical for the Holmul style—with a dark-value red slip. These darker areas may simply have been painted over multiple times using the same red slip rather than comprising a separate paint technique. The pictorial scene is an abridged version of the so-called “Holmul Dancer Theme” (Reents-Budet 1991), with only the dancing dwarf present (which is to say without the Maize god figure that usually dominates such scenes). Diagonal texts, of three glyphs each for a total of nine hieroglyphs, create three diagonal columns.

Based on the examination of the original surfaces of MS5331 it is clear that it was found in fragmentary condition and with a partially eroded exterior (with minor exfoliation evident also in parts). This weathering is due in part to the relatively soft surfaces typical of this ceramic ware. The repaired breaks are visible on the exterior of the bowl with a sizable amount of fill material added to restore lost areas. The exterior imagery has been repainted in selected areas to mask the repair lines and restore areas of eroded imagery. The bowl’s interior is highly burnished and painted with a light orange slip, and a wide red band encircles the rim. Directly below the interior red rim band is a thinner line in the same paint, with regular half-circle loops dipping below the thin line. An unusual feature of the bowl is the large Ajaw date notation adorning the interior center of the bowl, likely recording the dedication date. This practice echoes that of the so-called “Giant Ajaw” altars best known for Caracol (see Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981:79-102; Satterthwaite 1991:30-37) and to a lesser degree Tikal (Schele and Freidel 1990:213, Fig. 5:28). Similar Ajaw vessels are known from the Eastern Central Lowlands, particularly at Caracol (Chase 1994:163; Chase and Chase 1987:15, 17, Fig. 11b, d, g), Baking Pot (Ricketson 1933:25, Pl. 17a) and most recently finds made at Xunantunich (Helmke and Awe 2017). We will return to this feature when we consider the dating of the bowl from the historical vantage of its creation.

Further, MS5331 is chemically unlike the three vases painted during the second part of the eighth century for the Naranjo ruler K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan Chaahk (e.g., MS1374 and K635/MS1375) (Figure 2a-c). Yet the three vases are so similar to each other as to suggest they are the product of one workshop, while the especially strong chemical similarity between K633/MS374 and K635/MS1375 can be used to infer that they represent two vessels made from a common clay preparation.

Relative to the overall patterning of ceramic paste compositional divisions in the Maya lowlands, MS5331 fits comfortably within the compositional pattern for pottery made in the eastern central lowlands. That being said, for archaeological sites located in present-day Guatemala we can exclude Holmul, La Sufricia, Yaxox, Chuihuitz, Ucanal, Xaayha, and Nakum as probable locations of manufacture. Similarly, on the opposite side of the border in adjoining western Belize, we can equally exclude the sites of Xunantunich, Buenavista del Cayo, Las Ruinas de Arenal, Baking Pot, Barton Ramie, and Caracol. Unfortunately the data cannot confirm a specific workshop locale, although it does point to the immediate Naranjo area as the most promising and probable candidate. However, the bowl’s compositional profile is not notably close to any of the 146 Naranjo-excavated samples in the database, which may suggest that it was made from different clay resources and/or tempering materials and/or from an idiosyncratic potting recipe divergent from those used in the Naranjo workshops represented by the presently analyzed samples. Of particular note is MS5331’s chemical dissimilarity to all of the unprovenanced vessels in the database whose workshop, patron, and/or artist have been successfully connected to Naranjo based on paste analyses, artistic or ceramic typological attributions, and/or epigraphic evidence (Table 1). For example, MS5331 is chemically unlike the three vases painted during the second part of the eighth century for the Naranjo ruler K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan Chaahk (e.g., MS1374 and K635/MS1375) (Figure 2a-c). Yet the three vases are so similar to each other as to suggest they are the product of one workshop, while the especially strong chemical similarity between K633/MS374 and K635/MS1375 can be used to infer that they represent two vessels made from a common clay preparation.

Further, MS5331 does not chemically resemble the so-called Jauncy Vase (K4464/MS1416) (Figure 2d) made at Naranjo for its 38th king, K’ahk’ Tiliv Chan Chaahk (e.g., MS1684 and K1698/MS1684) (Figure 3a-c). The Jauncy Vase was painted by an artist with a distinctive slip paint formula for Naranjo, its court under the reign of K’ahk’ Tiliv Chan Chaahk, these works being distinguished by singular hieroglyphic and pictorial features. Another vessel attributed to this artist is K1698/MS1684, based on shared similarities in pictorial composition and paleography discussed below (Figure 2e). Yet unlike the Jauncy Vase, this one was specifically produced as a gift for the Ucanal ruler “itezamnaaj” Bahlam, who is named as its owner (Reents-Budet et al. 1994:300). The paste compositions of the Jauncy Vase and K1698/MS1684 are similar enough to suggest they were made from the same general clay resources, although there is sufficient variation in the rare earths and differences in the volcanic glass inclusions, specifically in the volcanic ash used as tempering material. Similarly, differences also are noted in the surface quality of the red slips used to paint the two cylindrical vessels: That of MS1684/K1698 is significantly shinier, harder, and thicker than the Jauncy Vase’s slip paint. Such surface characteristics typically indicate slightly different slip paint preparations (or “recipes”; see Reents-Budet et al. 1994:301). Also divergent is line quality seen especially in the glyphic texts, which from an art historical perspective imply that these are works of different painters.

Yet there are so many shared paleographic features to suggest that these two vases may have been produced in the same workshop attached to the Naranjo court. In summary, the paste compositional data, paleographic details, and stylistic features lead to the interpretation of the two vessels as being made by two artists who, if not working together, were certainly intimately knowledgeable of each other’s works. The compositional variation stems from slight changes in resource utilization and/or paste recipe, as typically happens among aligned artists even in the same workshop. These may occur due to the routine changes in availability of resources and natural “potting behavior,” wherein adjustments are made in any workshop over even a short period of time to adjust to available resources.

Whereas a conclusive match could not be established on the basis of chemical profiles and trace elements, the NAA data does shed light on the place of MS5331 in the socio-ceramic milieu of the eastern central lowlands. The analyses also confirm that MS5331 is chemically similar to other Zacatel Cream-polychrome vessels in the database. Most notable are MS1420 (K4669) (Figure 3a), MS1866 (Figure 3b), NK011 (excavated at Nakum) (Figure 3c), and BV8009 (excavated at Baking Pot, Belize) (Figure 3d), as well as other Naranjo-excavated sherds of whole vessels whose ceramic compositional and stylistic styles are consistent with Naranjo-area pottery in much the same way as MS5331. The available evidence suggests the immediate Naranjo area as the place of origin of these vessels. The analysis of these five Zacatel Cream-polychrome specimens suggests the immediate Naranjo area as the place of origin for these vases, wherein the paste compositional and paleographic analyses are outlined in red, and resulting areas are filled

**Iconography**

The exterior of MS5331 is decorated with both pictorial imagery and a hieroglyphic text. All elements of the imagery are outlined in red, and resulting areas are filled
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<th>MS1416 (K633)</th>
<th>MS1374 (K635)</th>
<th>MS1375</th>
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Table 1. Comparison of MS331 and a selection of vessels produced in workshops attached to the Naranjo court. Trace-elemental data in parts per million except where percentages are indicated. *CV = Coefficient of variation determined from 17 years of repeated analyses of SRM 679 Brick Clay, n = 311 (data from Blackman and Bishop 2007:327).

Figure 2. Vases produced at the royal Naranjo workshop for K’ahk’ Ukula’ Chan Chaahk and K’ahk’ Iti’ Chan Chaahk: (a) K633/MS1374; (b) K635/MS1375; (c) K2796/MS1763; (d) K4464/MS1416; (e) K1698/MS1684 (photos: Maya Ceramics Project).
Helmke et al.

The decorative field is divided into six rectangular spaces, wherein each of the three largest ones is dominated by a depiction of a dwarf figure (exhibiting achondroplastic dwarfism), glancing upwards (Figure 4). Separating these depictions are three glyphic bands, which together form one complete glyphic clause. The dwarves' raised heels, bent legs (Grube 1992:201, 204; Looper 2008:88, 92, 124; Proskouriakoff 1950: 28, 145, Fig. 9.J1), upraised arms, and dynamic poses (Looper 2008:3, Fig. 1; Taube 2009:46-47) make it clear that they are performing a type of ritual dance or pageant. Whereas the dwarves are shown wearing plain loincloths and their hair is simply bound in cloth wraps, it is their earspools and necklaces adorned with shell gorgets that mark their distinctive status. In each arm they brandish bundles of long feathers swaying wispily in the air—undoubtedly the long and highly prized tail feathers of the quetzal (*Pharomachrus mocinno*). The same feather bunches are frequently paired with valves of spiny oyster shells (*Spondylus* sp.), placed atop stacks of folded cotton mantles, a combination comprising the idealized tribute package offered by vassals to higher nobles and their kings (see Stuart 1998:411).

Without a doubt the dwarves and their dance serve to celebrate the time of the Maize God’s resurrection. This is made abundantly clear by the many portrayals of this deity and the accompanying dwarves on cylinder vases and plates, often painted in the Holmul style, made at workshops at a variety of sites in the eastern central lowlands (Reeves-Budet 1991; Reeves-Budet et al. 1994:179-186). It is in this part of the Maya area that this mythic motif predominated, and it is evident that it was of particular importance to the rulers of the area (Helmke and Kupprat 2016:59-69; Houston et al. 1992; Reeves-Budet et al. 1994:179-188). In these scenes we see the Maize God shortly after his resurrection and resplendent in fine regalia, while he dances in the company of a dwarf (Taube 2009). This seminal mythology from a maize-based culture led to the dwarf becoming the model companion of Classic Maya kings who themselves often acted in the guise of the Maize God (*H*ouston 1992). Although the Maize God is conspicuously absent on MS5331, the dwarves function as *pars pro toto* actors of the pivotal scene, their solitary dance conjuring the entire epic narrative.¹

Epigraphy

The glyphic text on the exterior is evenly subdivided into three equal segments of three glyph blocks apiece, each segment serving as a diagonal dividing band between the dancing dwarf figures. These segments run diagonally from the rim to the base of the vessel, the uppermost and lowest glyphs each delicately touching at the red bands that define the exterior of the vessel. We will explore the text on the exterior first and will return to the Ajaw date in the interior at the end of the paper.

Dedicatory Segment and Vessel Type (A1–B1)

The first glyph block (A1) is well preserved and can be identified as an Initial Sign that initiates a dedicatory statement on ceramic vessels (see MacLeod and Reeves-Budet 1994:109, 124) (Figure 5a). On monuments this same glyph serves as a type of focus marker, emphasizing the most salient clauses (e.g. at Tikal and Caracol) (see Grube and Martin 2000:69, 71, 109) and also serving as a type of final emphatic device in texts of the eastern central lowlands (e.g., at Dzibanche and Lamanai) (see Helmke in press). On portable objects, and ceramics in particular, this glyph functions as a type of demonstrative pronoun (if read *alay* “this, here”) (MacLeod and Polyukhovich 2005) or as a type of quotative device that...
The verb is followed by a substantive (A3) that refers to the object that was dedicated. In this case the glyph block has suffered a fair bit of erosion, but the remaining elements can nonetheless be distinguished as yu’k’i-b’i for yax’ik’t. This lexeme can be segmented as y’-u’k’i-‘b’i and translated as “it is his drinking implement,” involving the verb u’k’ “to drink” followed by an instrumental suffix -b’, the whole prefixed by the third-person singular pronominal possessive prefix (see Houston et al. 1989; MacLeod and Reents-Budet 1994:115, 127-128). As such it is clear that this bowl was primarily intended as an implement for drinking, which also implies that it was designed to contain a liquid. Ordinarily the forms of Maya ceramics tell us something of their contents, with tall vases with narrow orifices reserved for beverages, wide dishes of shallow depth for solid foodstuffs, and bowls of intervening size for broths and semi-liquids. This observation is borne out in this case also, since the following glyph block, at the start of the second column (B1), refers to the intended contents (Figure 5b).

Here this is spelled fully phonetically as ti’-u’-lu and read ti’i “tortoise/maguey gruel” (MacLeod and Reents-Budet 1994:118-119, 128). As such we can see that the text corroborates the intended contents of the vessel as viscous maguey gruel, one of the favored beverages of the Maya, both then and now. The ha syllabogram used in this glyph block is also a distinctive variant, exhibiting two large dots in the upper portion of the sign, an other-wise uncommon feature. Interestingly, as far as we have been able to ascertain, this particular variant of ha does not appear on other ceramics of Naranjo workshops, suggesting that this is an idiosyncratic feature of the scribe who painted MS5331.

**Patronage and Nominal Segment (B2–C3)**

The initial portion of the text was given over to an abridged dedicatory statement, as well as specifying the type of vessel in use and its intended contents. The remainder of the text starts with the next glyph block (B2) providing an honorific titular expression that introduces the name of the original owner of the vessel. Whereas it may seem a rather abrupt transition between the first and second portions of the text, the latter is linked to the former via a possessive suffix -si’-u’-lu, marking this drinking implement as the prized possession of a distinct and particular individual. Anthroponyms, or the names of human individuals (particularly yr’u’-kal’-tzi) names, are usu-ally followed by titles, in keeping with the syntax of the Ch’olan language recorded in the glyphs, although at times additional titular expressions precede the name. These can be identified as honorific expressions, and in this case such one is spread over the remaining two glyph blocks of the medial column. The first half is written CH’AK-OL (B2) followed by pi’-zi-t’i (B3). Together this was probably read ch’ak’oh pi’-tzi-t’i, involving the verbal
root of ak’ “to chop, axe,” the substantive ohl “heart,” and the head of the expression, pitzil. The latter probably serves as the substantive “ballplayer” and is a derived form of the verbal root pitz as seen in the verb “to play ball” in reference to the fascinating ballgame of the a ballplayer, whose various virtues are emphasized, serving to qualify what type of ballplayer he was. As such, the owner of K5331 likewise appears to have been designated as a “heart-chopping ballplayer” (Figure 8b). The whether this is nuanced lyrical language or chillingly meant in a rather literal way remains unknown.

As well as first to give two glyph blocks of the final column (Figure 5c). Split over two glyph blocks, the first part of the name can be translated as TE’- la-CHAN-na (C1) that modifies the syntactic head, the deity K’AWIL (C2), whose snout is partly eroded. Most individual elements are readily identified, save the second sign, marked with a question mark, which here may be rendered as a rarer variant of the OL logogram within a circular frame. This is reminiscent of the rare OL variant also seen in the nominal segment of the large jadeite plaque recently discovered at Nim Li Punit, involving what appears to be a T-shaped wind sign within a cartouche (Prager and Bravewell 2016:271, Fig. 4b). Together the name on MS5331 thus reads TE’-ohl Chan K’awiil. Alternatively this name may involve a moon sign—designated as T1H in the Thompson catalog (1962). As such one alternate transliteration would be as TE’-ja-la, in which case the name is read TE’-al Chan(atal) K’awiil, wherein the putative –jal would function as an attributive suffix. The same sign might also function as the logogram “twenty” for Te’-va’t Chan K’awiil, although at present we are unsure as to which of these alternatives is more likely, without additional examples of the name.

This type of name is typical of the eastern central lowlands, naming one particular aspect of a deity. The structure of these names is rarer, involving the name of the deity at the end of the nominal phrase, chan “sky” in the medial segment, and opening with either a verbal expression or a substantive (see Grube 2000 and Helmke 2014). Thus the something along the lines of “K’awiil is... in the sky” if the medial segment is understood prepositionally as ch’an “within” the sky) or alternatively, “while K’awiil stands in the sky” if the medial segment was meant to be treated in derived form as ch’anal “celestially.” Clearly a coherent understanding and translation of the name traditional compound, the constituent parts of which are patent enough in isolation, but less so in compound form. The final glyph (C3) provides the title proper of the original owner and in many ways is the most fascinating part of the whole text. It provides a complete emblem glyph, the exalted title of ruling kings, here written as K’AWIL-OMO-AYAJ. While there are several readings for this can be read k’uhk’al komkom ajaw, wherein the medial segment is the most truncated. As such this provides us with the dynastic title of the “divine king” of a place or dynastic house named Komkom. This locality is known from the texts of Naranjo as a place that was attacked and burned on March 30 AD 693, likely during the reign of K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan Chaahk (Figure 8a). The same locality may also be mentioned in connection with a “Star War” verb on April 24 AD 726, towards the end of the reign of the same king (Figure 8b). The whether this is nuanced lyrical language or chillingly meant in a rather literal way remains unknown.

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shown pleading at the feet of K'ahk' Tiliw on the front of
emaciated, near-naked, and powerless king of Ucanal is
east, Bital to the southeast, and Ucanal to the south. The
texts make it clear that this is none other than “Itzamnaaj” Bahlam, who is clearly named as overlord. Similarly, in the same text the accession is documented. “Itzamnaaj” Bahlam is said to have taken place the year before in June AD 712, an event that is explicitly said to have taken place 9.15.0.0.0 4 Ajaw
in front of K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan Chaahk. This interesting reversal, from defeat in AD 698 to re-accession 14 years later, demonstrates how fleeting power could be during Late Classic times. In addition, this historical event entails the most likely production date for K1698, with the vase perhaps specially commissioned to commemorate the enthronization of the Ucanal ruler and to cement his vassalage to his Naranjo overlord.

Truly remarkable in this regard are the many paleographic features seen in the text of K1698/MS1684 that represent salient points of commonality with the text of MS5331, in spite of the fact that their paste compositions are notably different although both pertain to Naranjo ceramic production. Among these paleographic details, we can point to the same a- vocalic sign (A1), the same variants of $nu$- and $ki$- in the vessel-type glyph (C1), and the identical AJAW logogram in the title of the Ucanal king (Figure 9). The latter is identical in every detail, including the cap on the “pillow” sign to the left, the cross that marks the center of the same sign, and the interior lines of the “throne” sign to the right (compare J1 on K1698/MS1684 with C3 on MS5331). All of these features together suggest that the texts on both vessels were produced—by not by the same scribe—by contemporaneous painters who produced vessels by closely following the same scribal template. Considering the evidence at hand it seems likely that—much like the Ucanal vase K1698/MS1684—MS5331 was also custom-made for a foreign ruler, in this instance the king of Komkom. Most likely, too, the bowl was commissioned, sometime after AD 712, during the more diplomatic phase of K’ahk’ Tiliw’s reign and as a direct corollary of the attack inflicted upon Komkom in AD 696.

It is in this respect that the date inscribed in the base of the bowl has direct bearing on this discussion. The date provides a record in the Tzolk’in calendar and has been written in abbreviated form as 4 U-AJAW for
chan ti [kuin] ajaw or literally “four on the day Ajaw” (Figure 10). Warranting such a degree of ellipsis is the significance of the date with regards to an important, well-known, and celebrated period ending in the Long Count. As such it is likely the record of a K’atun period ending with a “round” Long Count date, and the best match with these parameters is the date 9.15.0.0.0 4 Ajaw
13 Yax, or August 23, AD 731. What is surprising about this date is that it falls three years after the latest known date for K’ahk’ Tiliw’s reign, whereas one would expect the bowl to have been produced under his sovereignty. While this bowl cannot be used as tangible evidence for K’ahk’ Tiliw remaining in power until 731 it is certainly a tantalizing suggestion. Alternatively, the bowl may indeed have been manufactured to cement an alliance between Naranjo and the lord of Komkom, and this may have occurred under the reign of a successor. This alternative historical scenario could explain the idiosyncratic

Figure 9. Roll-out of K1689 and drawing of the glyphic text (photo © Justin Kerr; drawing: Christophe Helmke).
pastes of this specimen within the larger corpus of sampled pottery attributed to K’ahk’ Tiliw and other Naranjo kings.

Irrespective of the particulars, this unsung bowl reflects an important event in the history of the Komkom dynasty and celebrates an alliance between Te’ ... Chan K’awil and the rulers of Naranjo. If the bowl were commissioned to celebrate the accession of Te’ ... Chan K’awil, then K’ahk’ Tiliw, at the very end of his reign, emerges as the likely patron. But then again, the bowl may have been a gift from the successor of K’ahk’ Tiliw on the occasion of his own accession in order to cement an erstwhile alliance with the kings of Komkom, his allies to the east.

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