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Reflections on the Codex Style and the Princeton Vessel¹

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In This Issue:

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PAGES 1-16

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It was early in the 1970s that the academic community became aware of a number of Maya vessels of uncertain provenance that quickly came to be recognized for a particular style. This was characterized by scenes and glyphic texts executed with dark lines on cream-colored backgrounds, the pictorial space usually framed by red bands on the edges of the vessels (Figures 1–9, 12, 14). This lent them a certain resemblance to Maya manuscripts of the Late Postclassic. Accordingly, Michael D. Coe (1973: 91) conjectured that their painters were also the authors of the bark paper books, which led him to coin the term

“codex style” to designate this group of clay containers of unknown origin.

Manufacture of these ceramics has been dated to AD 672-731 (Reents-Budet et al. 1997). Based on type and variety, the tradition is grouped under the category of Zacatal Cream-polychrome (Hansen et al. 1991:225; López and Fahsen 1994:69), with a distribution in the Peten and southern Campeche. Codex-style vessels are characterized by the high quality of their clays and firing techniques, as well as the use of carbonate temper (Reents-Budet and Bishop 1987:780,783; Hansen et al. 1991:232).² The whitish color of the vessel sides is due to a creamy, matte, unpolished slip of fine sand.³ Some pieces present a very light yellow tone because the slip contains small quantities of iron (Robicsek and Hales 1981:3). Vessels and sherds in codex style from Calakmul⁴ have yellow backgrounds as often as cream (Boucher and Palomo Carrillo 2000:52; García Barrios and Carrasco Vargas 2006:127).

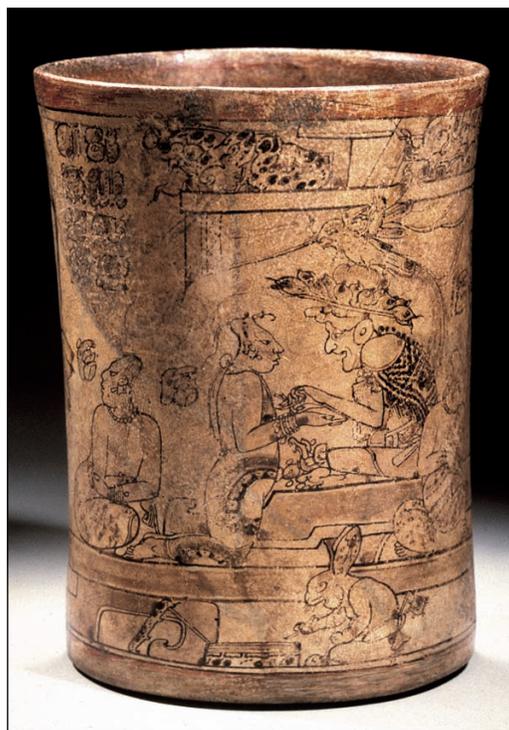


Figure 1. The Princeton Vessel. Photograph K511
© Justin Kerr.

¹ An earlier version of this article was published in *Arqueología Mexicana* (Velásquez García 2008).

² Temper is a substance added to the clay when highly malleable, achieving a plasticity adequate for modeling. Generally it involves sand, carbonate, volcanic ash, quartz, shell, or ground-up sherds (see Shepard 1956:53-54).

³ Slip is a creamy solution of water and very fine clay used to cover the vessel after polishing and before painting and firing. It serves to improve the color, impermeability, and texture of the surface (see Shepard 1956:67-69).

⁴ More than 650 fragments of this ceramic style have been recovered from the south patio of Structure XX of the Great Acropolis at Calakmul (García Barrios and Carrasco Varga 2006:127). Sherds of codex-style ceramics have also been found in nearby Uxul (Nikolai Grube, personal communication 2009).

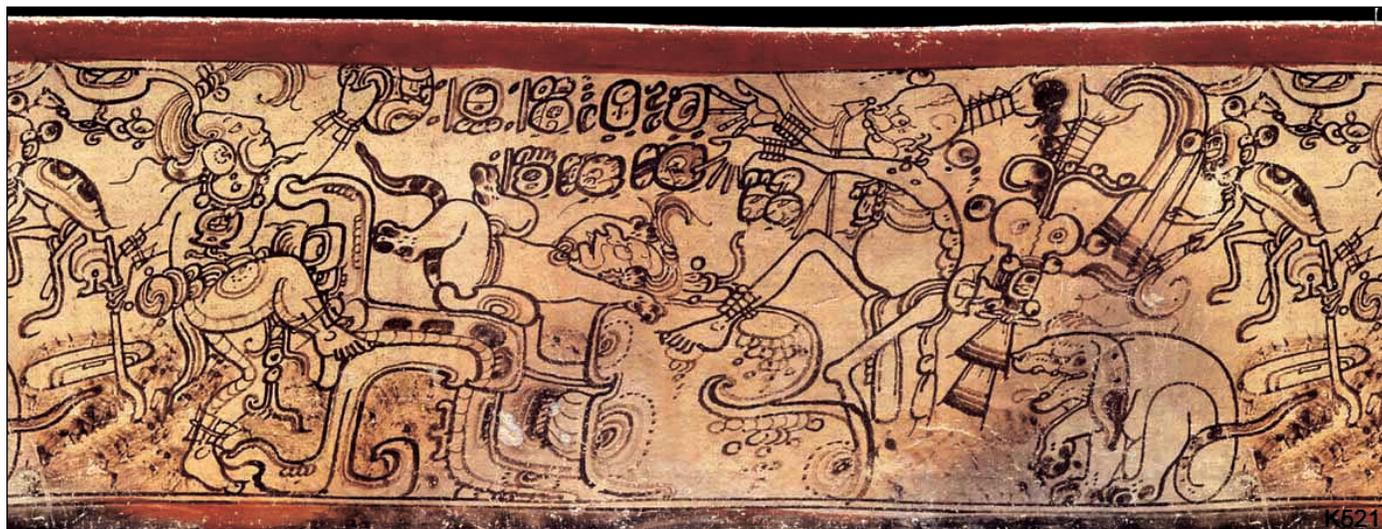


Figure 2. Codex-style vase with a scene in which the death god throws (*yal*) the Baby Jaguar onto a hill named *Huk ...l Yaxkal Chak...*, while the rain god wields his axe. The vessel's owner carried the *K'uhul Chatan Winik* title, a venerable ethnonym in northern Peten and southern Campeche (see Boot 2005:505-516). Metropolitan Museum, New York. Photograph K521 © Justin Kerr.



Figure 3. Codex-style vessel with depictions of *wahyis* figures holding plates of human bones, eyeballs, and fingers. On the left is ... *Amal*, "... toad," while on the right we find *K'ahk' Nelh] Tz'uutz'* (*K'AK'-ne tz'u-tz'i*), "fire-tail coati," the *wahyis* of a lord of Tikal (see Grube and Nahm 1994; Stuart 2005:160-165). Private collection. Photograph K4116 © Justin Kerr.

Meanwhile, only cream backgrounds have been found on sherds and vessels from the Guatemalan Peten at the sites of El Mirador, El Zotz, La Muerta, La Muralla, Nakbe, Pacaya, Porvenir, Tintal, and Zacatal, and probably Carmelita and Naachtun as well (Matheny et al. 1980:8; Reents-Budet and Bishop 1987:778, 781, 785; Hansen et al. 1991:226-227, 238-239; López 1992). The interiors of many vases have an orangish slip similar to vessels of the Palmar Ceramic Group (Hansen et al. 1991:225). The iconography, texts, and red bands were painted on the slip before firing at 800–900° C. (Reents-Budet 1997:21, 1998:271). Some pieces retain traces of bands of stucco that were applied on the lips of the vessels post-fire and painted blue.

Line drawing over areas of color clearly predominates in the painted scenes. Typical of the codex style is the use of black or dark brown lines executed with great skill, firmness, and clarity. On occasion certain figures or glyphs are accented by discreet red lines or diluted

washes of ochre (Figures 5–7, 12). Also typical of the style are the aforementioned red bands that extend along the upper and lower edges of vases (Figures 2–3, 5–7, 12, 14) or around the circumferences of plates (Figure 4). The bands can be demarcated by fine black lines, on occasion double or triple.

The repertoire of forms (see Robicsek and Hales 1981:3; Reents-Budet and Bishop 1987: 778; Hansen et al. 1991:225; López and Fahsen 1994:71) includes shallow plates or *lak* (Figure 4), deep plates or tripods (*jawante'*), various bowls with flaring sides, and cylindrical vessels (*uch'ib* or *uk'ib*).⁵ Less frequently we find fluted vases, jars, chalices, or cups with handles (see Robicsek and Hales 1981:Fig. 4b, d-f) and bottles with narrow necks

⁵ As in my previous publications, in this article I follow as a working method the orthographic rules suggested by Alfonso Lacadena and Søren Wichmann (2004), although I am aware of the ongoing debate about vowel length in the Maya Classic.



Figure 4. Codex-style plate depicting the rebirth of the maize god, assisted by the Hero Twins. He emerges from the split carapace of a turtle, which in turn symbolizes both a sacred mountain and the parched surface of the earth floating on the sea. The dedicatory formula of this plate indicates that it belongs to Titomaj K'awiil, who was the son of Yopaat Bahlam (see Lopes 2004); both rulers carried the *K'uhul Chatan Winik* and *Sak Wahyis* titles. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photograph K1892 © Justin Kerr.

nicknamed “poison flasks” (see Coe 1973:136; Robicsek and Hales 1981:Fig. 4a), which in reality served to store powdered tobacco (Grube and Gaida 2006:72-73, 189-191; Stuart 2005:132).⁶ Robicsek and Hales (1981:Fig. 4f) illus-

trate a codex-style cup with annular base that displays a noteworthy integration of (bidimensional) painting and (tridimensional) modeling, in that the handle is an extension of the body of a painted serpent.

Divergences in line thickness (see Robicsek and Hales 1981:5-7; Reents-Budet and Bishop 1987:778-780), paleographic variation (Martin 1997:850), and the chemical

⁶ The glyphic text of one “poison bottle” (Robicsek and Hales (1981:220, Table 20b) labels it as a “house for tobacco” (*yotoot mahy*).

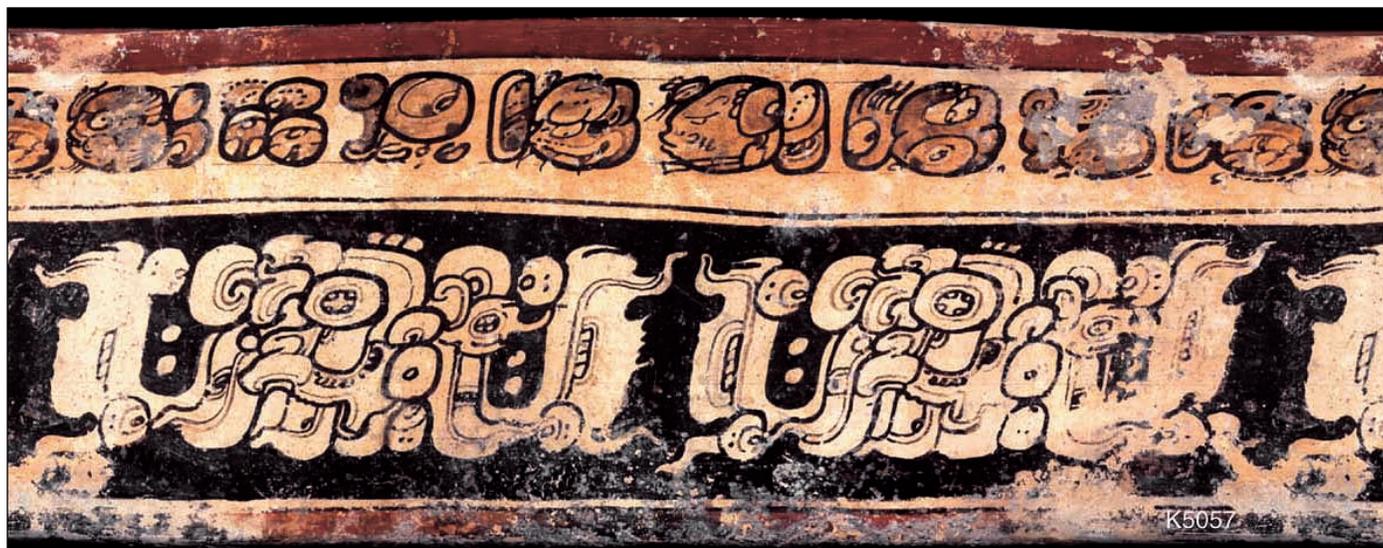


Figure 5. Codex-style vase with negative painting. The surface is decorated with heads of the so-called Waterlily Monster, symbolizing the sea, lakes, and bodies of water in general. The dedicatory formula contains a phrase found on many vessels of the codex tradition: *ayal(?) tz'ihbnaj jich yuk'ib ta yutal ka[kalw K'uhul Chatan Winik*, "Now painted is the drinking cup for cacao-fruit of the Divine *Chatahn(?)* Man." Private collection. Photograph K5057 © Justin Kerr.

composition of ceramics pastes (Hansen et al. 1991:238) all attest to the work of diverse artists and workshops. Some works are characterized by their homogeneity of line weight, while others combine thick and thin strokes (Figures 2, 4–7, 12, 14). Some painters made use of all the possibilities of the brush to diminish or increase the thickness of a single line (Figures 5–7, 14), achieving a calligraphic effect. Some resorted to extremely fine lines the thickness of a single hair (Figures 4, 7, 14), while others applied black pigment on areas of cream background to achieve the effect of negative painting (Robicsek and Hales 1981:5; Reents-Budet and Bishop 1987:778, 1987:778; Hansen et al. 1991:232) (Figure 5).

Painters in codex style chose various methods for the arrangement of images and glyphic texts (see Reents-Budet and Bishop 1987:779). Some vases contain scenes with figures in narrative postures (Figure 2, 4, 7, 12, 14), while other concentrate on long dynastic lists or glyphic cartouches. Frequently the figures depicted are accompanied by glyphic captions containing their names or explaining part of the significance of the scene (Figures 2, 4, 6–7, 14). There are also repetitive images that extend in parallel to the dedicatory formula (Figures 5–6). Some bowls are only decorated with sky bands or glyphs. The pictorial composition of codex vessels is generally based on simple scenes, with a limited number of objects or figures, and attention focused on the latter (Figure 14). Interior settings are barely suggested by curtains, cushions, or thrones covered in jaguar skin (Figure 8), while trees and isolated mountains convey the exterior environment (Figure 2). The identity of the figures who participate in these scenes is indicated by their nominal clauses, poses, gestures, elements of attire,

or objects of paraphernalia (Robicsek and Hales 1981:9). Elderly gods show a great variety in their expressions and facial characteristics (Figures 8, 14).

Painted themes in codex style

The range of themes presented on codex-style vessels varies from the dynastic (Martin 1997; Guenter 2001) to the cosmological and mythological. Images of the latter category are the ones that have most intrigued students of iconography (Coe 1973:90–101, 1978:16–45, 1982:42–43, 97, 103–105; Robicsek and Hales 1981, 1982; Reents-Budet 1994; Taube 2001; Martin 2002; Boot 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2008; Grube 2004; Lopes 2005; Stuart 2005; García Barrios 2005, 2006; García Barrios and Valencia Rivera 2007).⁷

One of the most frequent topics is the sacrifice of the Baby Jaguar (*Unen Bahlam*), who is thrown by the death god onto a mountain located in the east and carrying the name of the patron god of the month Pax (Figure 2). Meanwhile, the rain god is about to decapitate the infant or split open the mountain so that the Baby Jaguar can enter. The name of this axe-bearing deity is *Yax Ha'al Chaahk*, "Chaahk of the First Rains?," which suggests that the scene involves an act of ritual infanticide in order to invoke the rain (Martin 2002:52–53). García Barrios and Valencia Rivera (2007) have proposed that this episode is only the conclusion of a mythic cycle, which begins with incest between an old god (*Itzam[?]*) and his daughter (*Ix Wayaab*). Numerous vessels of the codex tradition depict distinct moments of this narra-

⁷ See also Nick Carter, as cited by García Barrios and Valencia Rivera (2007:4, n. 2).



Figure 6. In quality of line, pictorial composition, theme, and calligraphy, this vessel from a private collection closely resembles one found in Tomb 1 of Structure II, Building 2H at Calakmul (see Schmidt et al. 1999:294), suggesting that they were works of the same painter or workshop. They depict two consecutive moments in the rebirth of the Maize God (*Ju'n Ixiim Ik' [?] Sibik Ajaw*), who emerges from a fantastical head with earth markings, which in turn emerges from the waters of the underworld. The dedicatory formula of both vessels states: *ayal(?) tz'ihbnaj jich yuk'ib ta yutal kakaw K'uhul Chatan Winik, Sak Wahyis*, "Now painted is the drinking cup for cacao-fruit of the Divine *Chatahn(?)* Man, White *Wahyis*." Glyphs caption the maize god as *ajsiyalj] ichiil*, "he who was born within." Photograph K2723 © Justin Kerr.

tive, which still has its parallels amongst the K'iche' Achi' of Rabinal (Janssens and Akkeren 2003).

Another important theme treated by painters in the codex style is the birth of the young Maize God (*Ju'n Ixiim ?*).⁸ He emerges from the split carapace of a turtle, symbol of the dry earth (Zender 2006:10), while he is attended by the Hero Twins, *Ju'n Ajaw* and *Yax Bahlam*⁹ (Figure 4), who would appear to be his sons (Taube 1993:77). In another version of the birth of the Maize God, who seems to die and be reborn a number of times, he emerges in the fetal position from within the waters of the underworld. Two consecutive moments of this nativity are depicted on a vase of unknown archaeological provenience (K2723) and on another found at Calakmul (Figure 6). The body position adopted by *Ju'n Ixiim Ik' (?) Sibik Ajaw* is similar to that of the Baby Jaguar in the scenes of his sacrifice (Figure 2), as well as the ruler K'inich Janaab Pakal I (AD 615-683) on the lid of his sarcophagus at Palenque. It is a pose associated with liminal moments, being employed as often for death as for birth (Martin 2002:72).

Among the many themes from codex vessels that it will not be possible to deal with fully in this essay are the compositions of *wahyis* beings (Figure 3), malevolent spirit entities (Stuart 2005:160-162) thought to be the embodiments of illnesses and spells (see Zender 2004a:72-77, 2004b:201-202), a belief which can be interpreted as the Classic-period antecedent of present day nagualism (see Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:178-179; Stratmeyer and Stratmeyer 1977:136-139, 152; Ruz Sosa 1982:55-64, 1983:427-428; Holland 1989:96-98, 124-132; Villa Rojas 1990:336-458, 1995a, 1995b). This involves a sort of third soul or spirit familiar,¹⁰ possessed only

by rulers and powerful men of Maya society, which left the body by night in order to cause sickness and death.¹¹ On various vases in codex style these beings are found holding up plates with human bones, fingers, and eyeballs, symbols of the spirit entities of their enemies that they devoured in nightmarish feasts (Houston et al. 2006:122-123; Velásquez García 2009:475-541).

We also find the heads of supernaturals that symbolize cosmological locations or features, among them the so-called Water-lily Monster (see Schele and Miller 1986:46), a being with a large snout and a missing lower jaw. Its forehead can carry a cross read as K'AN, "yellow"

⁸ The logogram following the name of *Ju'n Ixiim* on K1892 (Figure 4) remains undeciphered, but Karl Taube (2005:25) observes that it is the head of a crocodile. This accords with the fact that among the Classic Maya (Stuart 2006:140) and the K'iche' Achi' (Akkeren 1999:291-294) the young maize plant was conceived of as a tree holding up the sky (*Ixiimte' / Ixim Che'*), while the axis mundi was a crocodile tree to the Yukatek Maya (Barrera Vásquez 1976) and probably also the Maya of the Classic (see Taube 1993:52).

⁹ The "jaguar" reading of this name is not secure (see Miller and Martin 2004:56), and I use it here as a nickname only.

¹⁰ "*Uaay [wáay]*, 'familiar of necromancers, *brujos*, and sorcerers, which is some animal that by a pact made with the devil they fantastically transform into, and any evil that befalls the animal befalls the *brujo* as well...' (Arzápalo Marín 1995:745-746, translated from the Spanish). In Spain of the sixteenth century, a *familiar* was "a devil that, it is supposed, has dealings with a person and accompanies and serves him" (*Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española* 2001:703, translated from the Spanish).

¹¹ This point of view about nagualism can be termed *esoteric*. From the *exoteric* perspective, the necromancer is transformed into a malevolent being. (For an explanation of these two points of view see the work of Alfredo López Austin 1989:1:422, 2:294.)



Figure 7. The Princeton Vessel, also known as K511 or MS1404, measures 21.5 cm in height by 16.6 cm in diameter. Of unknown archaeological provenance, it was restored by Robert Sonin. The original owners were Mildred F. and William Kaplan, of New York City. In 1975 it was donated to the Art Museum of Princeton University by the Hans and Dorothy Widenmann Foundation. To celebrate the acquisition of this piece, the museum organized the exhibition *Lords of the Underworld: Masterpieces of Classic Maya Ceramics*, the catalog for which was written by Michael D. Coe (1978). Photograph K511 © Justin Kerr. Drawing by Marc Zender.

or “precious,” from which leaves, stalks, or blossoms of aquatic flora emerge (Figure 5). Another theme is the head of the War Serpent (*Waxaklaju’n Ubaah Kan*), an ophidian of an igneous nature combining the attributes of a jaguar and a butterfly (Taube 1992b:59–68, 2000:285), as well as the well known scenes of the monkey scribes (Robicsek and Hales 1981:53–63; Coe and Kerr 1997:106; Hansen et al. 1992). In such themes there is no narrative intention, and the symbolic elements are distributed symmetrically on both sides of the cylinder, giving them the character of a name.

The Princeton Vessel

The masterpiece of the codex style is the Princeton Vessel (Figures 1, 7–9). Its two narratives take place simultaneously but can only be appreciated by rotating the vessel. The great naturalism of its scenes is expressed in the command of human anatomy, the juxtaposition of planes, the expressivity and individuality of each face, the effect of frozen movement, the extraordinary delicacy of line, and the sensation of backlighting produced by washes of light brown of various intensities over ar-



Figure 8. Detail of Princeton Vessel: God L (center) ties the bracelet of a kneeling maiden while a rabbit scribe (foreground) records events in a codex. The woman on the far right pours cacao from a height in order to froth it (Miller and Martin 2004:76). Photograph K511 © Justin Kerr.

eas of anatomical volume and architecture, in contrast to the uniformity of the background.

The principal scene, which takes up the greater part of the vessel's surface, takes place inside the palace of God L. On a number of vessels this deity is named

as *Uhxlaju'n Chanal Kuy* (Figure 13), and on others Itzamaat (Figures 14–15). Coe (1973:91, 93) suggested that he is one of the rulers of the Maya underworld, while Peter Mathews (cited by Coe 1978:16) held that he is the terrestrial counterpart of the supreme god



Figure 9. Detail of Princeton Vessel: the Hero Twins (wearing masks) decapitate a lord of the Underworld. The victim of the sacrifice has marks on his body indentifying him as a god. Photograph K511 © Justin Kerr.

Itzamna. Taube (1992a:79-88) noted important connections to rain, commerce, and tobacco. The elderly deity's principal insignia is a wide-brimmed hat with the effigy of a bird (Figures 8, 10). He also customarily sports a cape decorated with chevrons and rectangles (Figure 8), a shawl with fringes on the edge (Figure 10), or a covering of jaguar skin, as well as a necklace of small beads and a scepter in the form of a serpent.

On the Princeton Vessel (Figure 8), God L is enthroned under a curtained pavilion, on whose canopy we find the head of a shark (*xook*), flanked by a pair of agnathic jaguars who disgorge blood or vegetal elements. He is accompanied by five young women with the cranial deformation known to physical anthropologists as tabular oblique. It has been variously suggested that these could be his daughters, lovers, concubines,

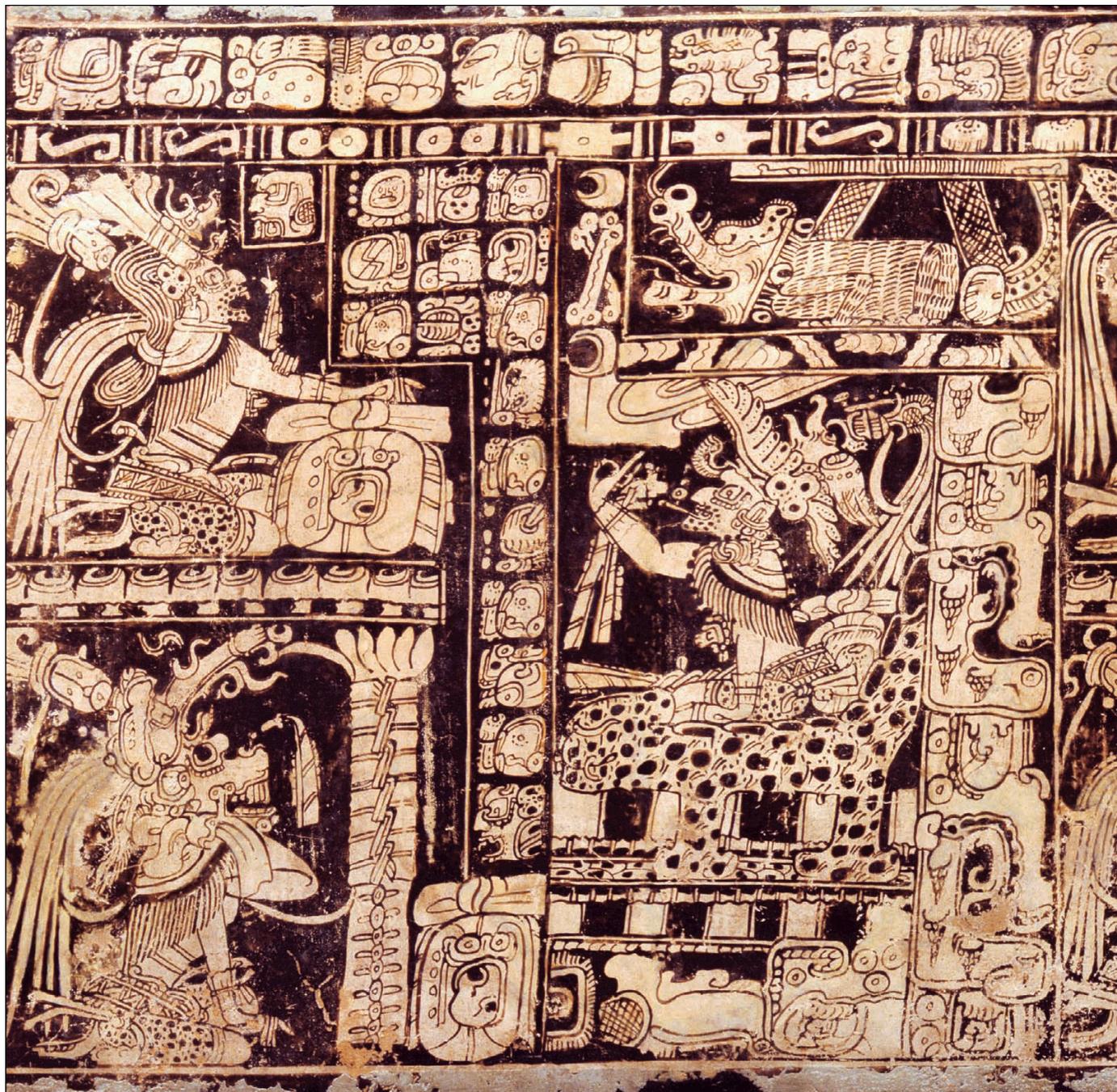


Figure 10. Detail of the Vase of the Seven Gods depicting God L as the supreme ruler of the Maya pantheon at the dawn of time (August 13, 3114 BC). Dressed in a lordly manner and seated on a jaguar throne, the underworld deity smokes and makes a gesture of eloquent discourse to the conclave of gods over which he presides (two of the six are visible in this detail). Behind him we see a bundle (*ihkaatz*) which may contain jade. Not in codex style, this vessel is from the Naranjo region. Private collection. Photograph K2796 © Justin Kerr.

members of his harem, moon goddesses, or patronesses of the number two (Coe 1973:93, 1978:16; Robicsek and Hales 1981:35; Schele and Miller 1986:286; Miller and Martin 2004:59-60; Kerr and Kerr 2005:2). One of them kneels while God L fastens her jade bracelet and appears to ask her something about diadems, necklaces,

or jewels (Figure 11).¹² Other maidens converse, while one of them pours chocolate from one cylinder vessel to

¹² Mary E. Miller (1999:208) has suggested that God L adorns the maidens "with jade jewels, perhaps stripped from the Maize God, since he also seems to have hidden the Maize God's belt ornament in his lap."



Figure 11. God L's speech to the kneeling maiden is connected to the deity's mouth by a fine and sinuous line. The decipherment of some of the glyphs is still doubtful, while others are very eroded or repainted: (K1) *xi-ni* (L1) *yo?-ba?-me?* (K2) *o-ma?* (L2) *a-sa-ya* (K3) *HUN?-na* (L3) *?-xo-?* (K4) *mu?-?-a-AK'AB?-li?* (L4) *UH?-?-?*, *xin yoba'mo'm(?) asay hu'un(?) ...xo... mu(?)...ak'abil(?) u'h(?)...*, "perhaps it is broken, the cover of your diadem..., darkness collar...?"

another. Another maiden looks out silently from behind the cushioned back of the throne, intensifying the sensation of depth, a common recourse of the Maya, who did not use the vanishing point or horizon line. In the foreground, and below the platform of the palace, we find a rabbit who appears to be recording the events in a codex with wooden covers wrapped in jaguar skin, using a paintbrush or quill to write. This composition is tied to another by means of the woman who twists her torso and turns her head to observe with concern the decapitation sacrifice which is taking place behind her back. She touches the ankle of the kneeling woman with the index finger of her right hand in order to warn her of the imminent danger. The victim of the sacrifice has marks on his body indentifying him as a god. Out of him rises up a ferocious serpent which seems to attack one of his executioners. Boot (personal communication 2008) has demonstrated on the basis of other vessel scenes (K1180, K1523, K4010, K8425, etc.) (Figure 12) that the serpent is in fact the tail of the sacrificial victim. This is probably one of the spirit beings (*wahyis*) that usually formed

part of the body but left it on occasion in order to inflict harm on an enemy. This belief, as we have seen, can be said to pertain to the phenomenon of nagualism. The two sacrificers carry stone axes and wear short skirts of jaguar skin. Their identities have been a matter of discussion for more than three decades, though now there is new evidence (see Miller and Martin 2004:58-62, 76) to reinforce the hypothesis that these are the Hero Twins, who hide behind masks so as not to be indentified by the denizens of the underworld while overthrowing God L. Ju'n Ajaw wears a mask with a Roman nose and elongated lips, while his diadem features an effigy of the "Jester God" (*Sak Hu'un*), symbol of power among the Maya. His deer ears identify him as a scribe and a solar entity, and he wears strips of bloody paper. The nose of the mask worn by Yax Bahlam turns into a jaguar paw (see Tokovinine and Fialko 2007:6-7). His long hair emerges from a column of sacrificial knots in the upper part of his headdress.

Other scenes associated with the Princeton Vessel

As noted by Simon Martin (Miller and Martin 2004:59-60, 76), the identity of the executioners as the Hero Twins seems to be confirmed by the scene on vessel K5359 (Figure 13), which records an episode previous to that of the Princeton. In it an underworld god with a headdress of centipedes and a necklace of eyeballs lies on a throne made of human femurs. From his body gushes streams of blood indicating that he has been sacrificed, at the same time that his *nagual* or spirit familiar (*wahyis*) in the form of a serpent appears to abandon his dying body. On both vessels it is possible that the serpent is the tail of the victim, which suggests that it is the same person. On vessel K5359, God L is seen naked, as he appears to have been despoiled of his insignia of power by the Hero Twins, who celebrate their victory on the right side of the composition. Above, on the left, the moon goddess appears to discuss the events of the scene with her smiling rabbit. Boot (personal communication 2008) has noted that the tail of the victim threatens to devour the moon, such as occurs in eclipses depicted in the Dresden (pp. 56-57), Madrid (pp. 67), and Paris (pp. 23-24) codices.

If the Hero Twins are truly the sons of the Maize God (see Figure 4) (Miller 1999:182), this would explain why the following episode of the story entails the capture and humiliation of God L at the hands of the maize deity (Figure 14). While from my point of view the analogies are somewhat overstated between the painted scenes of the Classic-period vessels and the Colonial K'iche' narrative of the *Popol Vul*, it cannot be denied that the story depicted on the Princeton Vessel has the same basic structure as the myth of Hunahpu and Xbalanque,¹³

¹³ Here I follow the spellings suggested by Christenson (2003) for the names of the Hero Twins.



Figure 12. Serpent-tailed *wahyis* beings: (top) photograph K1180 © Justin Kerr; (center) photograph K4010 © Justin Kerr; (bottom) photograph K8425 © Justin Kerr.



Figure 13. The scene on this vase, which possibly was made in the area of Lake Peten Itza given its color affinities with vessels of the Ik' tradition, contains an episode of the mythic saga in which the Hero Twins overthrow the powerful God L (*Uxlaju'n Chanal Kuy*) and strip him of his insignias of power: cape, staff, necklace, and broad-brimmed hat with an effigy of a bird. In the center of the composition we see another of the lords of the underworld, who lies sacrificed on a throne of bones; this is probably the same deity decapitated on the Princeton Vessel (*Tzikin[?] Itzam[?]*). Duke University Art Museum, Durham, North Carolina. Photograph K5359 © Justin Kerr.



Figure 14. This vase in codex style contains a complex pictorial composition that seems to narrate the downfall and final humiliation of God L, here called Itzamaat. The protagonist of the scene is the Maize God (*Ju'n Ixiim*). The naked God L is struck, kneed, and kicked by the Maize God. The verb involved is *mach*, "grab, sieze" or "grasp." A dwarf holds up the old god's scepter, cape, and sombrero with its bird effigy—formerly the symbols of God L's power. On the far left of the scene, another underworld god is suffering additional outrages. This vessel has been attributed to the same painter as the Princeton. It belonged to a dignitary named Yopaat Bahlam. Louvre Museum, Paris. Photograph K1560 © Justin Kerr.



Figure 15. This vessel, known as the Regal Rabbit Vase, contains a comic narration in which, on one side of the cylinder, God L is despoiled of his badges of power by a lordly rabbit. The spoken texts are tied to the mouths of the speakers with curving lines. On the other side, God L supplicates the Sun God, who harbors the rodent prankster. Is this the same rabbit from the Princeton Vessel (Figure 8) and K5359 (Figure 13)? Not of the codex tradition, this vase’s earth-tone coloration ties it to Naranjo, and it belonged to a ruler of that site, K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan Chaahk (AD 693-728). Private collection. Photograph K1398 © Justin Kerr.

who travel to Xibalba and sacrifice the gods of death, achieving their apotheosis and becoming heavenly bodies. Similar beliefs have been detected in the works of fray Diego de Landa¹⁴ and fray Bartolomé de las Casas,¹⁵ and in various ethnographic reports as well (e.g., Thompson 1975:425-446), reflecting the existence of a mythic substratum of considerable antiquity (Coe 1989).

A piece which can be fit into this narrative has been studied by Dmitri Beliaev and Albert Davletshin

(2006:25) on the so-called Regal Rabbit Vase (Figure 15). The insulted God L is found naked and asking the bunny for his vestments and his “image,” but the rodent answers him rudely in coarse language.¹⁶ Despairing, the ancient one comes to the court of the Sun God, from whom he seeks justice, but the latter covers up for the actions of the rabbit, who hides behind him. I am inclined to think that this is the same rabbit spy who, disguised as a scribe, is found on the Princeton Vase

¹⁴ “There was also in this place [Mitnal] a devil, the prince of all the devils, whom all obeyed, and they called him in their language Hunhau” (Landa 1982:60, translated from the Spanish).

¹⁵ “... it was put about that there was born in the province... [of] Vera Paz... a god called Exbalanquen. Among other tales, it is related that he made war against hell and fought with all its people, and he defeated them and seized the king of hell and many of his army. Returning to the world with his victory and his prey, he was begged by the lord of hell not to take him away from there, for there were already three or four degrees of light, and the victor Exbalanquen with great wrath kicked him, saying: ‘Go back, and may it be yours all that is rotten, and discarded, and foul-smelling.’ The Exbalanquen returned, and in Vera Paz, whence he had gone out, they did not receive him to his liking. And of this conqueror of hell, they say that he began the sacrifice of men” (Las Casas:1967:3:650, Chapter CXXIV, translated from the Spanish).

“The younger sons, who were called Huncheven and Hunaham, asked permission of their father and mother to make creatures;

they granted it, telling them that they would succeed at this because they had humbled themselves. And thus, they first made the heavens and the planets, fire, air, water, and earth; afterwards, it is said that from the earth they formed man and woman... All the skilled craftsmen, such as painters, featherworkers, carvers, silversmiths, and such, venerated and made sacrifices to those younger sons named Huncheven and Hunahan, because they granted them great ingenuity and skill to perform their offices in a polished and perfect manner... They held the opinion and even the belief that in the afterlife there was a hell and within it torments... They declared that there were mouths of hell and that one of them was in a town of Vera Paz called Cobán, and that he had sealed it up, that devil called Exbalanquen, who in the chapter above [CXXIV] we said had introduced the sacrifice of men...” (Las Casas 1967:3:505, Chapter CCXXXV, translated from the Spanish).

¹⁶ Yuriy Polyukhovych (personal communication 2009) has suggested an alternative translation that is if anything even more rude and coarse.

(Figure 8), as well as the one who looks down from the sky delightfully as he contemplates the downfall of the old god (Figure 13). The insignias of God L purloined by the rabbit could be the very ones that the dwarf displays in front of the wretched old man (Figure 14). These vases may well reproduce regional variants of the same myth. And it is worth recalling that in the *Popol Vuh* a rabbit aids Hunahpu and Xbalanque during their ballgame with the death gods (Christenson 2003:175-176).

Given that the mythological scenes on the Classic-period vessels are not contemporaneous with the Maya narratives of the colonial or modern era, the most reliable method for understanding them lies in comparative analysis of the vessels, together with decipherment of their glyphic captions and spoken texts. Only in this way can we recover fragments of ancient religious beliefs and discern the ways in which the myths were transformed across time and space.

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