



On the Text and Iconography of a Vessel in the Popol Vuh Museum

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Introduction

Our knowledge of Maya mythology is rather incomplete as a result of the lack of comprehensive texts with mythological contents. A notable exception is the *Popol Vuh*, a modern account of some episodes that no doubt were part of a much larger body of Maya mythology. Scenes from other myths have been identified in Maya art, specifically on polychrome and Codex Style vessels from the Classic Period, starting with the seminal works of Michael Coe (1973, 1978) and Francis Robicsek and Donald Hales (1981). More recently, several advances have been made in understanding the significance of myths associated with such characters as the Baby Jaguar (Martin 2002), the Maize God (Taube 1992), Goddess O (Taube 1994), and the "Hunt God" Wuk Sip (Taube 2003; Zender 1999).

In September 2003, while visiting the Popol Vuh Museum in Guatemala City, I had the opportunity to observe a vessel (Figure 1) whose iconography is very similar to that of another well known vessel, K5847 (Figure 7) in Justin Kerr's Maya Vase Database.¹ The iconography of the scenes and an analysis of the text indicates that these vessels do not match any of the previously identified "mythic complexes."

Although several points of the text remain obscure, it seems that both vessels depict events in the life of one "Lady Dark Sun." Both texts mention that "Lady Dark Sun" leaves an unspecified place, although on the Popol Vuh Museum vessel this reference is indirect. This text also mentions that the lady returns to a location called "Place of the Dark Sun." She is accompanied in this journey by two individuals who are also named on the vessels. The reason for this journey is not explicitly given, but the iconography may be related to marriage ceremonies (Houston et al., in press)

Throughout this note I will use rather free translations of the names of some of the characters and places when their readings are problematic.

Analysis of the iconography and texts

I will now turn to a more in-depth analysis of the texts on both vessels. The fact that both texts mention similar events allows a more accurate reading of some collocations, since the gaps present

¹ Justin Kerr has maintained a website of his photographic rollouts of Maya vessels since 1999. It can be consulted at <http://research.famsi.org/kerrmaya.html>.

in the text of one vessel may be reconstructed by observing the text of the other. The analysis of the Popol Vuh vessel is a bit more difficult since some parts of the vessel could not be photographed properly due to the way the piece is exposed in the museum. To my knowledge, no rollout of this piece is available for study.

The Popol Vuh Museum Vessel

On this vessel we have two representations of "Lady Dark Sun." In the first one (Figure 1), she faces a man with a headdress made from a jaguar pelt. The man is holding a staff, perhaps a walking staff, suggesting a trip. It seems that "Lady Dark Sun" is arriving from a trip since she carries a small backpack. In what is likely the next scene, she stands in front of a "Jaguar Lord" and no longer carries the backpack. "Lady Dark Sun" stands on top of a stone inscribed with glyphs (Figures 5 and 6). She is part of a court assembly overseen by a lord dressed in a jaguar pelt, holding a trident flint in his hand and seated on a throne. This same pattern is also observed on K5847. As we shall see, the texts and iconography seem to imply that she travelled to marry this lord. The markings on the face of "Lady Dark Sun" are very common to noblewomen depicted on ceramic pots (e.g., K2573, K4996), a feature that may equate them with the mythical "Lady Dark Sun."

The main text on the Popol Vuh Museum vessel (Figure 2) may be transcribed as follows:

[A1]	JUN-AJAW	<i>jun ajaw</i>
[B1]	HUX-YAX-K'IN-ni	<i>hux yaxk'in</i>
[A2]	LOK'[yi]	<i>lok'ooy</i>
[B2]	HIX-HAAB-ta	<i>hix haab</i>

It is noteworthy that this date matches exactly the date for the *lok'ooy* event on K5847 (see below). The **K'IN** glyph is written as a rather rare form with crossed-bones. Such substitutions, albeit uncommon, are well known from the context of certain distance numbers at Palenque and other sites (e.g., PAL Palace Tablet, B18). A **-ni** suffix is still visible to the side of **K'IN**, reinforcing the identification of the month as *Yaxk'in*. The logograph (T548) at B2 reads **HAAB** in calendrical contexts referring to the 365-day solar year. However, this semantic value does not seem to apply easily in the context of a toponym. The glyph takes a suffixed **-ta** sign, which is apparently optional as shown on the text of K5847 (main text, B2). This is reminiscent of the **AJ-9-T548-ta** title from the Petexbatun area, but its meaning is equally obscure. Whatever the reading, it seems clear that the collocation at B2 names an individual who is the subject of the verb at A2².

The occurrence of **HAAB** in the apparent name phrase of an individual is rare. However, there is one possibly relevant text from a Tikal stingray spine (Burial 116, MT 178) whose text can be transcribed as follows: 1?-LAMAT? 1?-UNIIW-wa **LOK'-yi ti-HUX-HAAB-ta**. In other words, on that particular date someone or something named *hux haab* "left."

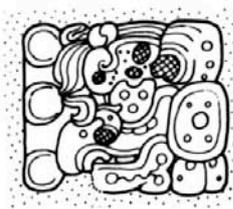
Another interesting observation is that the head variant and full figure forms of the **HAAB** "year" sign combine the features of a bird, skeleton and jaguar. More precisely, as first noted by Beyer (1928:34-35), the creature commonly has "jaguar"-eyes represented by the **HIX** sign, and occasionally sports jaguar spots and the **AK'AB** face markings typical of the **HIX** and **BAHLAM**

² This is clear from other uses of the mediopassive form of the **LOK'** verb in the corpus of inscriptions. A particularly good sequence of such *lok'ooy* events appears on the new steps of Dos Pilas Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, where in quick succession Bajlaj Chan K'awiil and his probable brother Nuun u Jol Chaahk escape from numerous locations in the midst of the seventh-century wars between Tikal and Calakmul.

head variants. These features are usually not present on the head variants or full forms of the glyphs for other calendrical periods.



Copan Stela D



Copan Stela I



Palace Tablet, Palenque

These observations point to the possibility that the *hix haab* mentioned on the Popol Vuh vessel may refer to this supernatural skeletal bird-jaguar creature associated in some manner with the **HAAB** calendrical period. Unfortunately, even if this mildly speculative idea is on the right track, the role of this creature in the narrative remains, at best, enigmatic.

So, to sum up, this part of the text tells us that on the given date, an individual referred to as "Jaguar Year" left an unspecified place. This may be a reference to "Lady Dark Sun" herself, perhaps a title, since she is the subject of a parallel *lok'ooy* event, on the same date, on K5847. The text continues with:

[A3]	ka-pa-xi	<i>pakax-i</i>
[B3]	TAHN-CH'E'N-?	<i>tahn ch'e'n</i>
[A4]	{Dark.Ajaw}[K'IN]-NAL	<i>?-nal</i>
[B4]	IX-T533	<i>ix ?</i>
[A5]	{Dark.Ajaw}[K'IN]-NAL	<i>?-nal</i>
[B5]	IX-OOK	<i>ix ook</i>
[A6]	a-hi	<i>ahiin</i>
[B6]	ya-ATAN-na	<i>yatan</i>

The collocation at A3 (**ka-pa-xi**) may perhaps be read *pakax-i* ("he/she/it returned"). Examples of this collocation are well known, namely from Naj Tunich Drawing 19 (Stone 1995:196). The grammatical structure is also the same, namely: the verb, the place, and the individual who returned to that place. On the other hand *kapax-i* may be a verb with a general meaning of "to arrive," forming a parallel with the above mentioned texts of the Dos Pilas HS2 (where the "arrival" verb used is *t'ab*, possibly meaning "to ascend"). The *tahn ch'e'n* collocation at B3 refers to "the center of a town or land." The place name itself, at A4, is written with a partially darkened **AJAW** head with an infixed **K'IN** sign, topped by the **NAL** superfix typical of toponyms. This place name is also part of the emblem glyph of El Peru. Since the reading for this toponym is problematic, I will use the rather free translation of "Place of the Dark Sun" for the remainder of this note.

In the next glyph blocks we have the name of the lady who returned to the "Place of the Dark Sun." She is "Lady ? of the Place of the Dark Sun" (**u-T533**-{Dark.Ajaw}[K'IN]-NAL), as reconstructed from the text on K5847. In the remainder of this text I keep the rather free translation of "Lady Dark Sun," as the reading of **T533** is still problematic. These two sentences may form a couplet describing the trip of "Lady Dark Sun": first she leaves an unmentioned place, and then arrives at the "Place of the Dark Sun."

David Stuart (personal communication 2003) reconstructed the following two collocations as the name of yet another lady, Ix Ook Ahiin or "Lady Crocodile Foot," identified as one of the consorts of "Lady Dark Sun" on K5847. As Stuart points out, this collocation clarifies the spelling of "crocodile" as *ahiin* rather than as *ayiin*. A similarly named lady appears on a Late Classic stela from the unidentified site of Pomoy (see Martin and Grube 2000:188-9), perhaps another indication of the importance of the "Lady Dark Sun" myth. Finally, the *y-atan* collocation that follows (reconstructed from a similar statement on K5847) likely refers to "Lady Dark Sun" as "the spouse of" someone not specified in this part of the inscription. "Lady Dark Sun" and "Lady Crocodile Foot" are named and represented as separate characters on K5847. This makes the grammatical composition of this sentence rather unusual since it presents the names of both ladies in sequence and it is not clear from this context alone to whom the "spouse of" collocation applies, or even if they are indeed two different individuals.

The secondary inscriptions on this vessel (Figure 3) are rather difficult to read, both because they are eroded and also because it was not possible to photograph them in better conditions. The texts seem to name the characters in the court scene. The large caption between the seated jaguar lord and the standing courtier may perhaps be transcribed as:

[A1]	?-ja?	?
[B1]	ba[K'IN]/?-ji-wi	?
[B2]	bi-cha-na	<i>bichan</i>
[B3]	?	?
[B4]	{Dark.Ajaw}[K'IN]-NAL	?-nal
[B5]	IX?-T533?	<i>ix</i> ?

The hand of the standing lord is touching the text, perhaps a hint that it is his speech which is recorded, although the usual speech scrolls are not visible. The collocation at B1 also appears associated with the jaguar lord in K5847. The main sign is composed of what looks like a **ba** syllable with an infix **K'IN**. This often takes **-ni** or **-na** suffixes, and for this reason is often read *bak'in*. However, there is some phonetic evidence which may indicate that this is actually a syllabic sign of the form **Cu**, with a still-undetermined initial consonant (Marc Zender, personal communication 2004). It is also noteworthy that this collocation is a very common title of elite women (e.g., K1383, K2914). The use of this title may be associating these ladies with "Lady Dark Sun" in the context of this myth. "Lady Dark Sun" herself may also be named at B5.

The other secondary text is apparently associated with the "Jaguar Lord" seated on his throne and is equally challenging:

[A1]	nu-NU'N?	<i>nu'n</i>
[A2]	TE'?-li	<i>te'il</i>
[A3]	?	?
[A4]	BAAH	<i>baah</i>
[A5]	TE'-li	<i>te'il</i>

The name of the "Jaguar Lord" is written as a glyph that, after much observation and comparison with other examples, particularly another occurrence on K5847, seems to be logographic **TE'** ("tree, wood"), plus a **-li** syllable. The **TE'** (T87) logograph apparently never acts as phonetic **te** (Marc Zender, personal communication 2004) and thus the collocation **TE'-li** is probably to be read *te'il*. If we analyze the *-il* suffix as an abstractive this would transform the word *te'* "tree, wood" into "treeness" or "woodness," the significance of which is rather unclear. The rabbit head at A4

looks like a **BAAH** with the characteristic scroll in front of its face. Thus, the entire compound may read **BAAH te-li** (*baah te'il*), which may be related to titles such as *baah kab*, *baah tuun* or *baah po'm*, attested in the script.

Finally, a smaller text (Figure 4) lies directly above "Lady Dark Sun," left of the main text. This may be transcribed as follows:

[A1]	IX?	<i>ix</i>
[A2]	?-bo?-ka	<i>?</i>
[A3]	?-?	<i>?</i>

The text is difficult to analyse without a better photo.

Kerr 5847

The scene on K5847 is apparently split in two by the main text and also by the back side of the cave. It is unusual for the ladies to arrive at the court scene from the back side of the cave. However, the ladies must indeed be arriving. First, "Lady Dark Sun" looks in the direction away from the court scene, perhaps cuing some sense of distance travel. Furthermore, the lady on her left, closer to the court scene, is already on the ground, which may signal the end of the trip. This interpretation may also find support in the *pakaxi* event from the text on the Popol Vuh Museum vessel.

The cave decoration is very similar to that seen on the Popol Vuh vessel. The "Jaguar Lord," wearing a jaguar headdress and holding a trident flint, sits on a throne. Like the Popol Vuh vessel, the scene on K5847 involves a court assembly, albeit here with several underlings facing the "Jaguar Lord."

It is worth noting that the ladies are being carried on the backs of young men. Was this the way ladies travelled in Classic times? For example, was this the manner of the epic voyage of Lady Six Sky from Dos Pilas to Naranjo, to establish a new dynasty? It has been suggested that the carrying of women in this way refers specifically to marriage, a practice still in use in some modern Maya communities (Houston et al., in press). This observation is rather interesting since "Lady Dark Sun" is described as "the spouse of" some undetermined character, and this piece of information seems important enough to be mentioned in the main texts of both vessels.

The main text on K5847 (Figure 8) opens with:

[A1]	HUXLAJUN-'BEN'	<i>huxlajun BEN</i>
[B1]	WAKLAJUN-u?-UNIIW?-wa / ka?-se?-wa	<i>waxaklajun uniiw/kasew</i>
[A2]	pe?/ts'o?-ta-ja	<i>pehtaj/ts'ohtaj</i>
[B2]	HIX-HAAB-ma?	<i>hix haab</i>
[A3]	NAAH?-JO'?-CHAN?-na?	<i>naah jo' chan</i>
[B3]	SUUTS'[WINIK]	<i>? suuts'</i>
[A4]	?-?-HIX	<i>?</i>
[B4]	ch'a-?	<i>?</i>
[A5]	?	<i>?</i>
[B5]	?	<i>?</i>

[A6] ?-?

?

At B2 we get the same Hix Haab individual referred to on the Popol Vuh vessel. Note the apparent **-ma** suffix to the **HAAB** glyph. (This also appears frequently in calendrical contexts, and may not have a phonetic value.). Here, this individual is apparently the subject of a verb, likely a passive form, with a main sign that is a rabbit head. A number of phonetic values have been proposed for this sign, including **pe** and **ts'o**, though neither can yet be demonstrated. If we assume the first value, the form may read *pe[h]/taj*. *Pet* is a well-known transitive root with the general meaning "to make round" (Barrera Vásquez 2001:647). But given the toponym that follows, this hardly seems a likely reading. If we assume the second value, the form may read *ts'ohtaj*. In Ch'orti', there is a transitive root *ts'ot* with the general meaning "to roll up" (Wisdom 1950:740) and in Yucatec there is the form *ts'otba* "meterse por alguna cosa angosta (to put something in a tight place)" (Barrera Vásquez 2001:890). This latter meaning may have some interesting connections to the later *lok'ooy* ("leaves, comes out") event, whose subject is this same *hix haab* individual. If the reading and interpretation are correct, perhaps he goes into some tight place and later emerges from it.

This is followed by what may be a reference to the Naah Jo' Chan mythological place name. At A3, there seems to be a **NAAH** glyph to the right, and a **JO'** numeral on top of what is probably a **CHAN** logograph (with a **-na** phonetic complement). However, it is hard to be sure as the glyphs are rather eroded. In one of the scenes on the Popol Vuh vessel, "Lady Dark Sun" stands on top of a stone with several glyphs inscribed, among them a **SUUTS'** "bat" head with an infixed **mo** syllable (Figure 6). Here, at B3, we also find a bat head that may be related. Perhaps this is what "Lady Dark Sun" is stepping upon on the Popol Vuh Vessel, as this kind of tagging is commonly associated with the graphical representation of toponyms (Stuart and Houston:1994). Unfortunately, this passage does not give us any further clues as to the identity of the "Jaguar Year" character.

The text follows with some rather eroded glyphs until we hit a distance number at B6 and another date, 1 Ajaw 3 Yaxk'in. Again, this is precisely the date in the main text of the Popol Vuh Museum vessel:

[B6]	CHAN-HUX-WINIK	<i>chan hux winik</i>
[A7]	JUN-AJAW	<i>jun ajaw</i>
[B7]	HUX-YAXK'IN-ni	<i>hux yaxk'in</i>
[A8]	LOK'[yi]	<i>lok'ooy</i>
[B8]	IX-u-T533-li	<i>ix u ?</i>
[A9]	{Dark.Ajaw}[K'IN]- NAL	<i>?-nal</i>
[B9]	ya-ATAN-na	<i>yatan</i>
[A10]	?	?
[B10]	?	?

It is interesting to note that the two dates in the text are inconsistent with the Distance Number given at B6. This is either a mistake or perhaps the very eroded glyphs from A3 to A6 have additional calendrical data that make the dates consistent. The action associated with the new date is "leaves." The text continues with the name of the person who "left," and this is none other than "Lady Dark Sun." Her name is clearly spelled in this text as **IX-u-T533-li** {Dark.Ajaw}[**K'IN**]-**NAL**. The place she left is again not explicitly given.

The remainder of the text says that "Lady Dark Sun" is the wife of someone named with what appears to be the head variant of the Jaguar God of the Underworld (JGU), or perhaps the Pax God

(Marc Zender, personal communication 2005), at A10, and a further unidentified glyph at B10. As Marc Zender points out to me, there is some iconographic evidence that links the "Jaguar Lord" to the Pax God. Indeed, the large jaguar paw behind the ear and the jaguar pelt motif on the lower jaw are identifying characteristics of this deity. The jaguar paw above the ear may also be faintly visible on the seated lord on the Popol Vuh Museum vessel. The Pax God is however best known for having its lower jaw replaced with a wooden implement, a characteristic that is clearly missing in these scenes. Whatever the case, if the "Jaguar Lord" in the scenes is the one named at A10, then the interpretation that these scenes represent the arrival of "Lady Dark Sun" at the "Place of the Dark Sun" to marry him (Marc Zender, personal communication 2005) is made more appealing.

Looking at the captions for the ladies on K5847 (Figure 9) we see that one of the ladies, the first one from the right, is indeed "Lady Dark Sun":

[A1]	IX	<i>ix</i>
[A2]	u-T533-na?	<i>u ?</i>
[A3]	{Dark.Ajaw}[K'IN]-NAL	<i>?-nal</i>

"Lady Dark Sun" seems to have had company during her travel, and these ladies are also named here as:

[A1]	IX	<i>ix</i>
[A2]	AKAN-na	<i>akan</i>
[A3]	SAAK-?	<i>saak ?</i>

and

[A1]	IX	<i>ix</i>
[A2]	OOK-ki	<i>ook</i>
[A3]	AHIIN-na	<i>ahiin</i>

There are four more captions (Figure 10) that name the remainder characters in the scene. Some collocations are common to the text on the Popol Vuh vessel, which makes it possible to establish a more secure connection between the text and the characters it describes. The dominant character in the scene is without doubt the "Jaguar Lord" seated on his throne. The text to the left of the "Jaguar Lord" seemingly refers to his accession:

[A1]	a-nu	<i>a'n</i>
[A2]	JOY-ja	<i>joyaj</i>
[B2]	TE'-li	<i>te'il</i>

The name of the character who is acceding (*te'il?*) is the same one used twice on the Popol Vuh vessel in association with the "Jaguar Lord." This phrase is probably a contracted form of *u baahil a'n ti joyaj te'il* or "it the image of Te'il acceding."

The text then appears to continue with the block immediately to the left of the "Jaguar Lord." This is a short and difficult text:

[A1]	CHUM?-TUUN	<i>chum tuun</i>
[B1]	?-ba[K'IN]/?-ji	<i>?</i>
[C1]	?-wa-?	<i>?</i>

[D1] **KAL?-ma-?-bi** *kalo'm? ?*

This seems to describe the seating of a stone by the "Jaguar Lord." The text above the characters in the top row, wearing the funny hats, is similarly difficult but mentions a "House of Darkness" (*ak'ab naah*), possibly a reference to the Underworld (see Barrera Vásquez 2001:8):

[A1] ?-? ?
 [A2] **wi?-b'i** *wib'*
 [A3] ?-? ?
 [A4] **AK'AB-NAAH** *ak'ab naah*

Finally, the text above the characters in the bottom row seems to refer to their headbands or perhaps to the tied bundle one of them is holding:

[A1] T533-**na** ?
 [B1] **HU'N-na** *hu'n*

Again, the relevance of these characters in the scene is difficult to establish, as they seem to be completely disconnected from the surrounding scene, and especially from the seated lord.

Final remarks

In this note I have analyzed the iconography and the texts of two Classic Period polychrome vessels. Both vessels describe an episode in the life of one "Lady Dark Sun," in which she leaves an unidentified place and travels to an Underworld location, likely called "Place of the Dark Sun," seemingly to marry a fearsome "Jaguar Lord," perhaps the Pax God. This tentative sequence of events may find some circumstantial support in K5538 (Figure 11) where a lady sits behind a lord inside a temple marked with the head of the Pax God, in the midst of a supernatural court scene.

The same triad of ladies depicted in this episode also appears on other polychrome and codex style vessels such as K2772 (Figure 12) and K6020, the "Vomit Pot" (Figure 13). This suggests that the scenes on the Popol Vuh Museum vessel and on K5847 are probably but one episode of a more complex mythic cycle.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 1. The Popol Vuh Museum vessel (photo by the author).

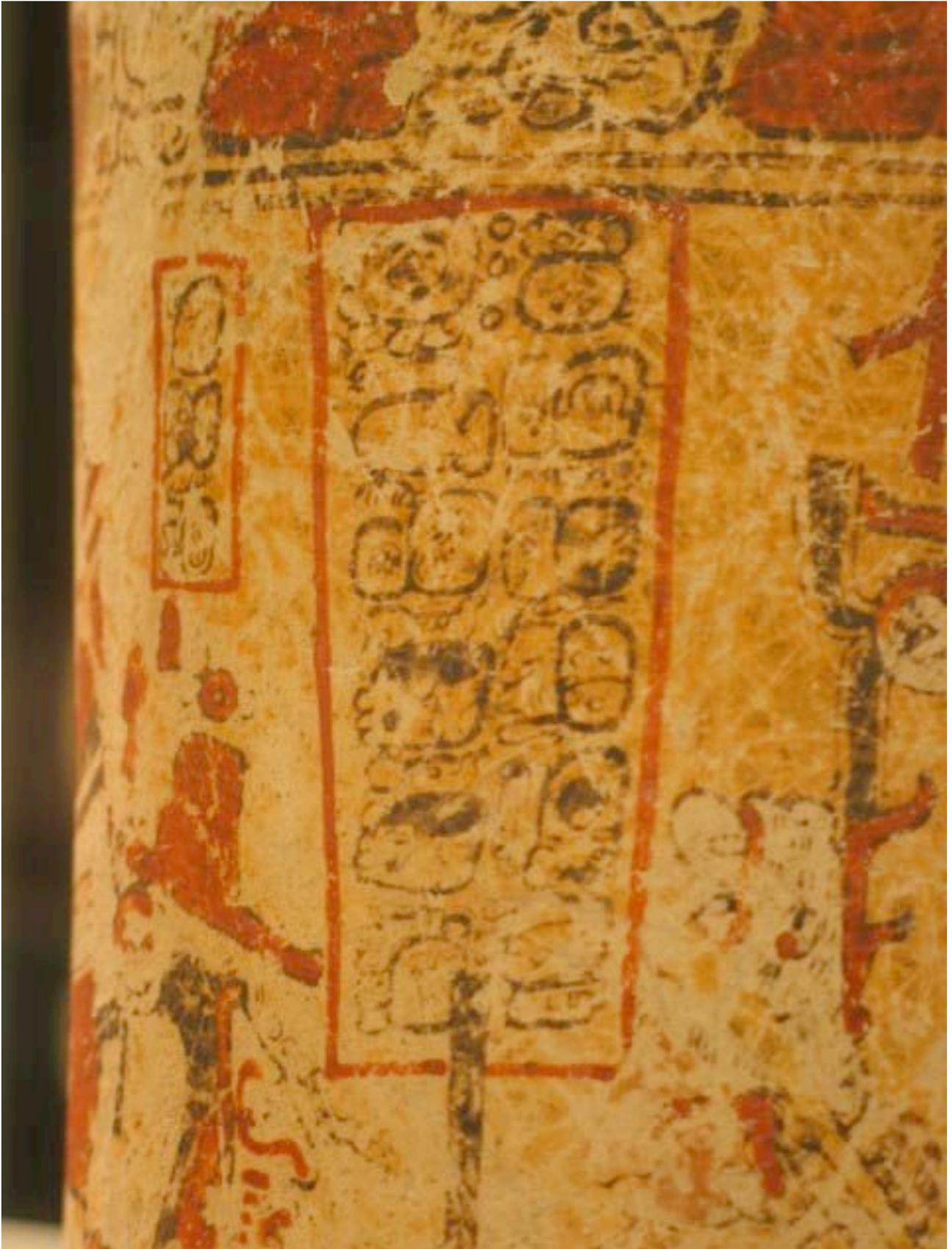


Figure 2. The Popol Vuh Museum vessel: main text (photo by the author).



Figure 3. The Popol Vuh Museum vessel: secondary text (photo by the author).



Figure 4. The Popol Vuh Museum vessel: secondary text (photo by the author).



Figure 5. The Popol Vuh Museum vessel: detail of Lady "Dark Sun" (photo by the author).



Figure 6. The Popol Vuh Museum vessel: detail of pedestal (photo by the author).



Figure 7. Kerr 5847 (photo by Justin Kerr).



Figure 8. Kerr 5847, main text (photo by Justin Kerr).



Figure 9. Kerr 5847, the ladies (photo by Justin Kerr).



Figure 10. Kerr 5847, court scene (photo by Justin Kerr).



Figure 11. K5538, a sequel to K5847 and the Popol Vuh Vessel? (Photo by Justin Kerr.)

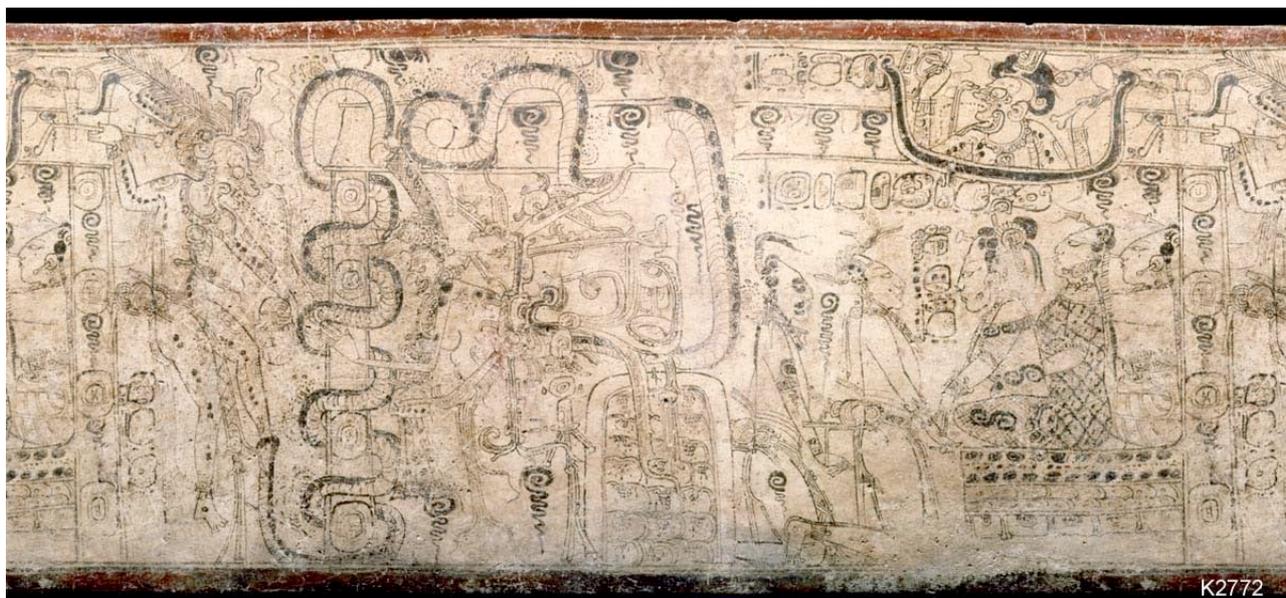


Figure 12. The Triad of Ladies on K2772 (photo by Justin Kerr).



Figure 13. The Triad of Ladies on Kerr 6020 (photo by Justin Kerr).