



The PARI Journal

A quarterly publication of the Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute
Volume X, No. 4, Spring 2010

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Electronic version
available at:
www.mesoweb.com/
pari/journal/1004

The PARI Journal is made possible by a grant from Precolumbia Mesoweb Press

ISSN 1531-5398

The Classic Court of Itzam K'an Ahk of Piedras Negras: New Information on a Vessel from the Yaxche Phase with Hieroglyphic Dedicatory Formula

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The present work will attempt to identify the origins and approximate date of an important unprovenanced vessel, based on typological analysis, iconographic elements, and most importantly the historical information contained in its hieroglyphic text.

As part of the ongoing work in the documentation of hieroglyphic texts being carried out by the Acervo Jeroglífico e Iconográfico Maya (Ajimaya) project, affiliated with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), we were able to take detailed photographs of an exceptional ceramic vase in October 2007. The vessel dates to the Late Classic period (ca. AD 600-900) and is presently in a public collection in Tenosique, Tabasco, under the auspices of INAH (Figure 1).

The vessel has slightly divergent sides, tapering upwards to 21.5 cm in height. Its diameter varies from 12.2 cm at the base to 14.8 cm at the rim. The vessel is in a very good state of conservation and shows no indications of ever having been repainted. It is still possible to discern nearly the entirety of its intended iconographic and epigraphic repertoire.

With respect to the vessel's classification in the conventional type-variety system, it presents polychrome decorations in black, white, and red tones over an orange slip, the whole applied to a creamy clear fine paste clay. A black line encircles the vessel's base, while the rim is encircled with two thick red lines with black borders enclosing a hieroglyphic text. The text is a typical "dedicatory formula" (Stuart 2005),

composed of eleven glyph blocks, painted in black lines over the aforementioned slip, but it also features a decorative technique in negative, employed in order to delineate accurately the background of the upper hieroglyphic band, as well as that of the vertical columns of pseudoglyphs. This

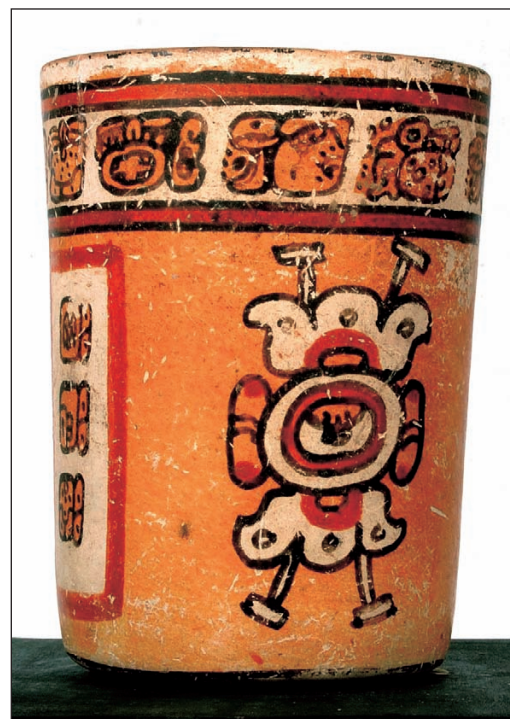
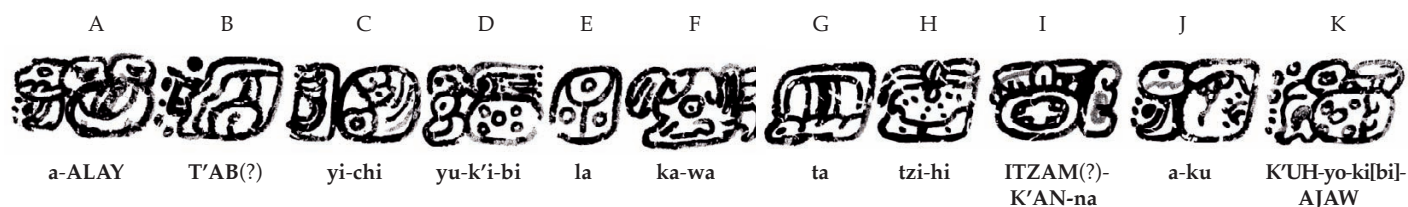


Figure 1. Yaxche Phase Vessel (AD 620-750), housed in a public collection in Tabasco. The vessel sports a central iconographic motif and a glyphic dedicatory formula with the name of a ruler known as Itzam K'an Ahk and the Piedras Negras emblem glyph. Photograph by Carlos Pallán, Ajimaya/INAH.



alay t'ab[aa]yich yuk'ibal [ka]kaw ta tzih Itzam K'an A[h]k k'uh[ul] Yokib ajaw

alay t'ab-aay-ich-Ø y-uk'-ib-al kakaw ta tzih Itzam K'an Ahk k'uh-ul Yokib ajaw

here ascend-M.PAS-COMPL?-ABS3s ERG3s-drink-INSTR-POS cacao PREP pozole(?) Itzam K'an Ahk god-ADJ Yokib lord

"Here ascends the drinking cup for cacao-and-pozole of Itzam K'an Ahk, divine lord of Yokib (Piedras Negras)"

Figure 2. Detail of the rim text "dedicatory formula," composed of eleven glyph blocks (drawing and epigraphic analysis by Carlos Pallán).

was accomplished with great skill, as at no time does this layer obtrude upon the edges of glyph blocks delimited by the black lines and orange slip. The analysis of the hieroglyphic text will be addressed in the following sections. The remaining portion of the vessel's surface shows two complex iconographic motifs (Figure 3, left) alternating with an equal number of columns of pseudoglyphs (Figure 8), each framed by a red border.

There is little doubt that the central motifs (Figure 3, left) conform to iconographic conventions in effect during the seventh century AD in the Usumacinta region for the representation of diverse floral elements. There are clear similarities with respect to the polychrome medallions embedded in the west facade of House E of Palenque's Palace (Figure 3, right), which perhaps provides additional testimony concerning the rivalry between Piedras Negras and Palenque. Not wholly a matter of political and military plans, on occasion this rivalry seems also to have something of the flavor of a competition for artistic supremacy over the western Maya lowlands.

According to Stephen Houston (personal communication 2006), the complex of attributes of this vessel may be sufficient to place it inside the Yaxche ceramic phase, widely attested in the ceramic sequence of Piedras Negras, Guatemala. Nonetheless, Houston further notes that it is relatively uncommon for vessels of this group to present authentic writing; most are

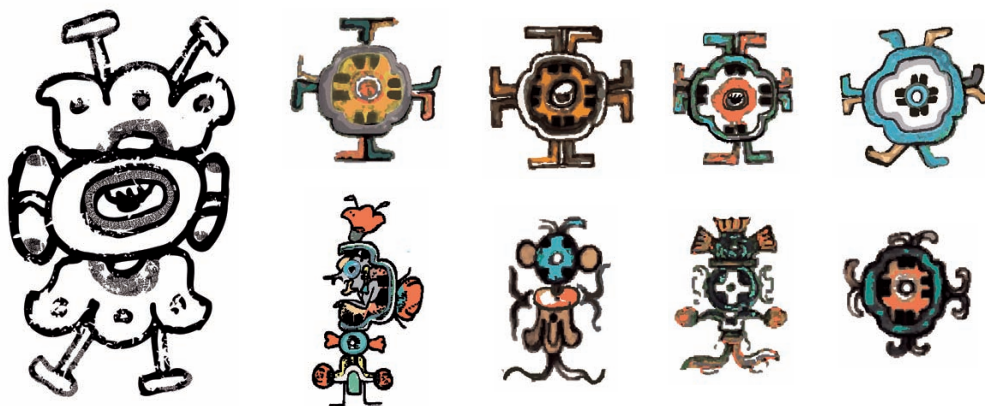
characterized by the presence of pseudoglyphs only.

There is very little additional reliable evidence on the vessel's origins. The individual in charge of the examined collection was interviewed, and he reported that it was donated by someone claiming to have discovered it near the archaeological site of Yaxchilan. But this information should be considered with extreme caution and only in the light of other available evidence (see Conclusion).

Analysis of the hieroglyphic text

As can be seen in the detailed analysis accompanying the illustration of the eleven glyph blocks (Figure 2), the text refers to the dedication of this vessel as its "ascension" or "promotion," perhaps indicating its elevation to the status of a sacred object or, alternately, its "ritual activation" (Stuart 1996:101). The object is described emically (i.e., in native classification) as a special class of "drinking instrument" (*yuk'ibal*) associated with a particular variety of cacao (*kakaw ta tzih*). The final element, *tzih*, which David Stuart (2005) has recently albeit tentatively translated as "pozole" (a maize drink made from a base of corn kernels soaked in water), may suggest that the beverage for which this vessel was designed may have some relationship with the cacao-and-pozole beverage still regularly consumed in certain regions of Guatemala, as well as in the Mexican states of

Figure 3. (left) The vessel's principal iconographic motif (drawing by Carlos Pallán, Ajimaya/INAH); (right) comparison with painted floral medallions from the facade of House E, Palenque (reconstruction drawings by Carlos Pallán based on Robertson 1985:Plates 30-33).



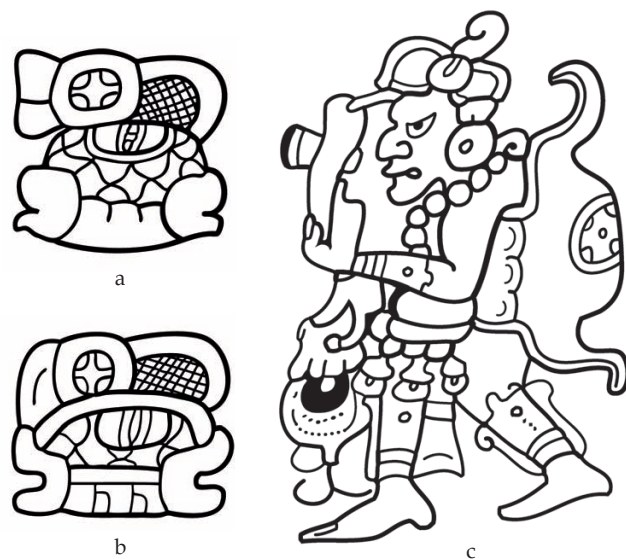


Figure 4. (a) Early Classic name glyph of Ruler A, Piedras Negras (drawing by Carlos Pallán based on Martin and Grube 2000:140); (b) Early Classic name glyph of Ruler B, Piedras Negras (drawing by Carlos Pallán based on Martin and Grube 2000:140); (c) Representation of God N displaying the three distinctive elements of the Itzam K'an Ahk name, Dresden Codex p. 37 (drawing by Carlos Pallán based on Martin and Grube 2000:141); (d) portrait of Ruler 2, Stela 35, Piedras Negras (after Martin and Grube 2000:144).



d

Chiapas and Tabasco.

In what follows, the text refers to an historical figure (a ruler of Piedras Negras) whose name functions as the grammatical possessor of the vessel. Such names are usually regarded as providing an object's "owner." Nonetheless, from an archaeological and historical point of view, the matter is complicated by the consideration that vessels of this type also functioned as prestige goods, and as such may instead provide the names of their original producers and not their ultimate recipients, who generally appear to have enjoyed some sort of blood relationship, or political, military, or other relationship with the producer (cf. Martin and Grube 1995:42). This important issue will be discussed later.

As to the identification of the ruler mentioned in the dedicatory formula as Itzam K'an Ahk, the surviving hieroglyphic record of Piedras Negras presently provides evidence of at least three distinct individuals with this name, the component elements of which are discussed further below, but the clear Late Classic characteristics exhibited by the vessel effectively rule out the possibility that it was commissioned during the reigns of the first two rulers with this name, since Ruler A, Itzam K'an Ahk I (Figure 4a), was in power in about AD 460, while there are records in Yaxchilan that place Ruler B, Itzam K'an Ahk II (Figure 4b), as a contemporary of Bird Jaguar III in AD 478 (Martin and Grube 2000:140-141).

Because the vessel in question shows features consistent with the types and varieties belonging to the Yaxche ceramic phase (c. AD 620-750), as explained

in more detail below, there is a high probability that the hieroglyphic name appearing on it corresponds to that of Itzam K'an Ahk III, also known as Ruler 2 in the dynastic sequence of Piedras Negras.¹

The reading of the latter part of the nominal sequences of these namesake kings of Piedras Negras as K'an Ahk has enjoyed a broad consensus among epigraphers for some time. However, the decipherment and etymology of the initial component has presented a more complex challenge. The sign in question, T64, can perhaps be related to representations of the elegant knotted net headdress of God N ubiquitous in the iconography.

David Stuart (1994:2) initially suggested, with due caution, that the names of these rulers of Piedras Negras could be read as Itzam K'an Ahk. To penetrate the meaning of the problematic initial sign, Stuart turned to parallel examples at Dos Pilas, Naranjo, Quirigua, Copan, and Xcalumkin. In more recent support of his proposal, Stuart (2001) cites a context on Copan Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, where the same nominal sequence is used to represent the name of a deity, but this time preceded by a phonetic complement indicating an initial *i*-.

Regarding the etymology of the term Itzam K'an Ahk, Erik Boot (2002:39) has proposed the meaning "Yellow Turtle-Lizard," but the exact meaning is still

¹ Although less likely, one cannot completely rule out the possibility that there were one or more additional rulers named Itzam K'an Ahk during the lengthy inscriptional hiatus of AD 518 to 603.

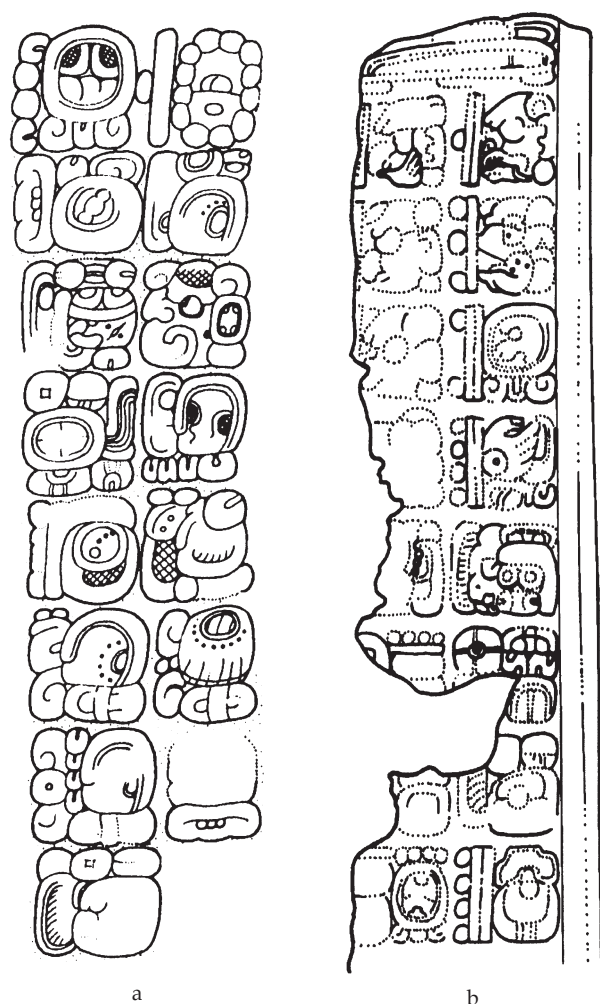


Figure 5. (a) Unprovenanced panel from the region of Piedras Negras (drawing by Nikolai Grube based on Mayer 1987:Plate 105); (b) Stela 35, Piedras Negras (drawing by Nikolai Grube based on a drawing by John Montgomery).

under debate. Some researchers have sought to explain it as deriving from the Mayan root *itz*, especially in its sense of “enchanted” (Boot 2005:37). Others have resorted to a different albeit homophonous root, previously discussed by some authors as a loanword into Mayan from Uto-Aztecan, semantically associated with different aspects of the use of obsidian mirrors for divination (cf. Karttunen 1992:108; Pallán and Meléndez in press; Simeón 1977:210-11; Taube 1997:34).

Apart from its precise meaning, the hieroglyphic sequence Itzam K’an Ahk finds additional support in ethnohistoric sources and the codices, as previously observed by Stuart (1994).² One representation of God N in the Dresden Codex shows him wearing the *itzam*

headdress while holding an ax, with a turtle shell (*ahk*) bearing as infix the *k’an* cross (T281), presumably as a modifier, indicating its quality as a “yellow” or “precious” object (Figure 4c).

Returning to the vessel in question, the final glyph block of the text shows the emblem glyph of Piedras Negras with all its familiar components, as first identified by Heinrich Berlin (1958). Today we know that the compound is to be read *k’uhul yokib ajaw* or “Divine Lord of Yokib.” With respect to the meaning of the final element, there are lexical entries for *yokib* indicating a meaning of “entrance” or “canyon” (cf. Houston et al. 1998; Lacadena and Wichmann 2004; Mathews and Biró 2007; Slocum and Gerdle 1971:168, cited in Stuart and Houston 1994:31), although it has also been interpreted as “pedestal” (Boot 2002:63). Both etymologies seem to allude to a greater or lesser extent to the geographical features of the site, such as its location at the entrance to a river valley, the steep canyons downstream along the Usumacinta, or the presence of a large cenote measuring some hundred yards wide in the immediate vicinity (Stuart and Houston 1994:31; Martin and Grube 2000:139).

The reign of Ruler 2, Itzam K’an Ahk III

The principal biographical facts concerning Ruler 2 have already been admirably outlined by Martin and Grube (2000:143-145). His full name appears written in several contexts, such as Piedras Negras Panel 2 in the form ? Chahk Itzam K’an Ahk. Martin and Grube (2000:142) report that he was born in 9.9.13.4.1 (May 22, 626), that he acceded to the throne in 9.10.6.5.9 (April 12, 639), and that he died in 9.12.14.10.13 (November 15, 686). He succeeded his father Yo’nal Ahk I on the throne of Piedras Negras when he was only twelve years old. During his reign he apparently forged an alliance with the powerful Yuknoom the Great of Calakmul (Grube 1996), through which Piedras Negras seems to have controlled the upper Usumacinta, dominating sites like Palenque, Yaxchilan, Bonampak, and Lacanha.

Some time ago, Mary Miller proposed that there was a relatively long period during which Yaxchilan was under the dominion of then-powerful Piedras Negras, a factor that would explain the absence of monuments commissioned during the early years of the reign of Shield Jaguar II (Miller 1991; see also Grube 1996; Martin and Grube 2000:123, 144). Piedras Negras Panel 2 shows young lords of Yaxchilan, Lacanha, and Bonampak wearing the *ko’haw* or “Teotihuacan war helmet,” in clear postures of submission to the dominance of Piedras Negras in the upper Usumacinta (Figure 6).

Grube (1996) and others have discussed the evidence suggesting that, during the reign of Ruler 2, Piedras Negras was in turn subject to the powerful orbit of Yuknoom the Great of Calakmul. On Piedras Negras

² For example, as Stuart (1994) has noted, the Fifth Letter of Hernán Cortés refers to the Chontal settlement of Itzamkanac, identified by many authors with the archaeological site of El Tigre on the Río Candelaria, Campeche (cf. Vargas 2001:52).

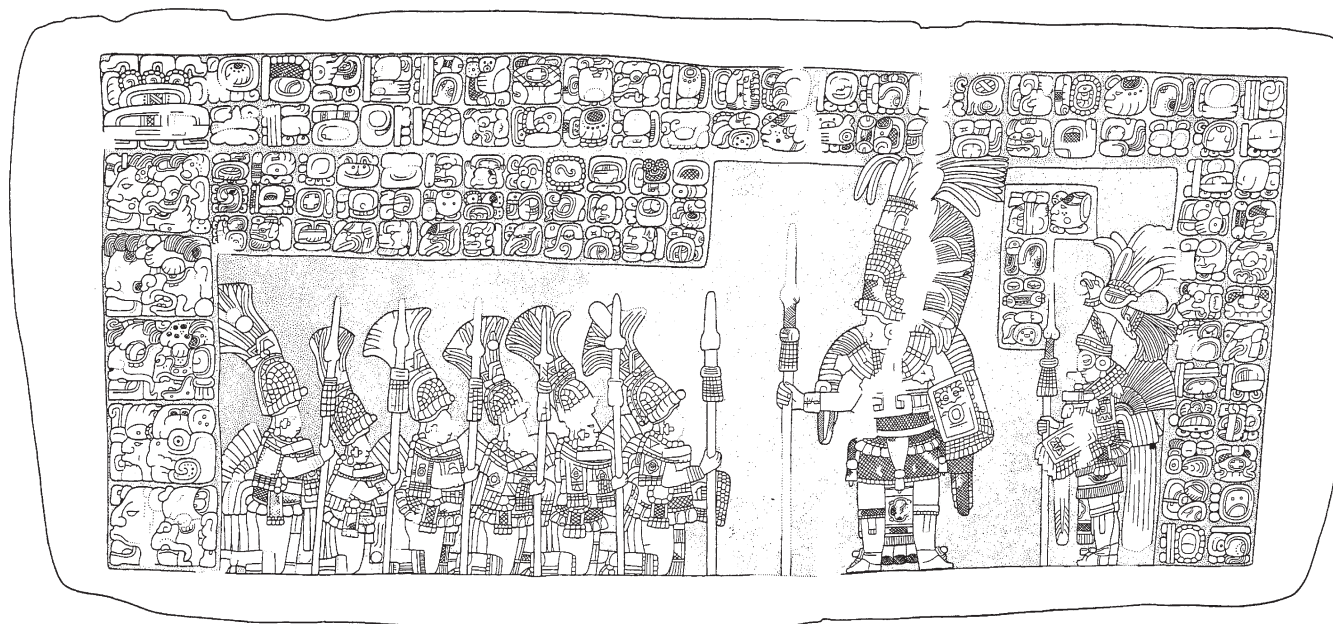


Figure 6. Panel 2, Piedras Negras (drawing by David Stuart).

Stela 35 (Figure 5b) can be found the emblem glyph of Calakmul associated with the date 9.11.9.8.6 (AD 662), precisely during the reign of Itzam K'an Ahk III. According to recent interpretations by Stephen Houston and Simon Martin (cited in Martin 2003:46-47) the event referred to may have registered the arrival at Piedras Negras of Yuknoom the Great himself, as well as his participation in a fire ritual, ostensibly for the additional purpose of forging a military alliance, as would seem to be indicated by the successive attacks of Piedras Negras upon Santa Elena and another unidentified Usumacinta location, which occurred just a few days later. We have a magnificent portrait of Ruler 2 from this period, appearing in victorious pose and military attire on the front of Stela 35, which originally showed him above a defeated captive (Figure 4d). Also, as noted some time ago by Grube (1996), subsequent events are described on a looted panel from an unknown satellite center of Piedras Negras. There, on the date 9.12.13.4.3 2 Ak'bal 6 Mol (AD 685), we read the following account:

na-h-w-aj-Ø u-nuk u-ko'haw Itzam? K'an Ahk K'i[h] n[a'] ajaw u-chab-Vj-iyy-Ø aj-? K'ul K'ahk' ?... y-al[j]-baak Yuknoom? Ch'een? k'uhul Kaanuul ajaw

"The skin and helmet of Itzam K'an Ahk III, Lord of K'ihna' were adorned. It was overseen by Aj ... K'ul ... K'ahk' ..., captive-taker of Yuknoom Ch'een II, Divine Lord of Kaanuul."³

From a broader perspective, the previously discussed

epigraphic evidence, combined with slightly more indirect evidence from sites like Palenque and Moral-Reforma, has allowed the inference that bloody battles were once waged over the control of a fertile region in the eastern portion of what is now Tabasco (cf. Martin 2003:47), in the delta formed between the San Pedro and Usumacinta rivers, in which the military alliance of Calakmul and Piedras Negras faced the strategic interests of Palenque, with the initial result of victory for the former, yielding them control of the region until the late seventh century AD. At that point, K'inich Kaan Bahlam II of Palenque at last recovered Palenque's previous holdings in the contested region, whereas only a few years later, in August of 695, Calakmul was defeated by Tikal, severely undermining its hegemonic capabilities (Martin 2003:47; Martin and Grube 2000:110-111).

Piedras Negras Panel 2 (Figure 6) marks the first k'atun after the death of Yo'nal Ahk I and the taking of the *ko'haw* war-helmet. The iconography may depict the ruler Itzam K'an Ahk III alongside his heir to the throne, whose child name is Joy Chitam Ahk, receiving the submission of six youths in full military dress, from Yaxchilan, Lacanha, and Bonampak. Another possibility is that the scene depicts a similar event which occurred in AD 510, in which case the ruler depicted would instead be Turtle Tooth I (Martin and Grube 2000:140-144). For now, it is difficult to link the names of the other characters represented in the scene with those attested in the respective dynastic sequences of the sites mentioned. Should this ever be possible, it would help greatly to determine the date of the depicted event.

³ The *Kaanuul* reading for the emblem glyph used by Calakmul after AD 636 is based on a possible phonetic substitution of *ka-nu-la* for the more conventional sequence *ka-KAAN-la*, as observed by Dmitri Beliaev (personal communication 2007).



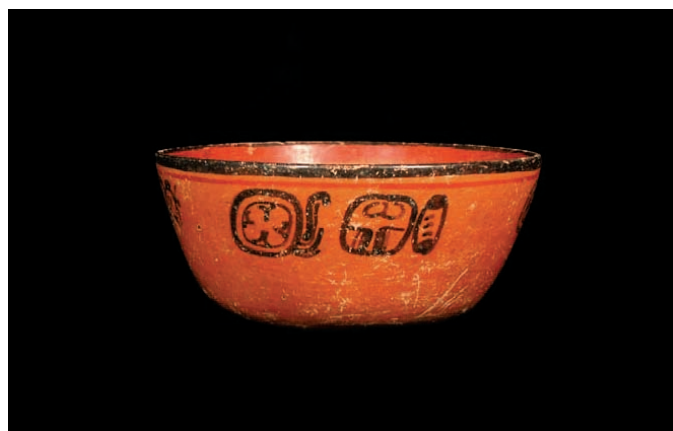
a



b



c



d

Figure 7. Piedras Negras Ceramics: (a) Yaxche phase sherds, Palmar group, Palmar Orange Polychrome type, Resist-Reserve variety; (b) Balche phase, Palmar group, Saxche Orange Polychrome type, Saxche VU variety; (c) Yaxche phase vessel, Santa Rosa group, Santa Rosa Cream Polychrome type, Negra variety; (d) Balche phase vessel, Palmar group, Saxche Orange Polychrome type, Saxche variety (after Muñoz 2003).

Ceramic analysis

The ceramic sequence of Piedras Negras has been worked out in detail by René Muñoz (2003), Mary Jane Acuña (2004), and Robert Rands (1960) among others. As mentioned above, Stephen Houston (personal communication 2007) first drew my attention to the similarities of the vessel under discussion with those of the Yaxche phase (AD 620-750), for which reason my initial research focused on the many types and varieties which comprise this phase. However, upon further consideration there may also be some similarities to the pottery of the previous Balche phase (AD 560-620)

(Figures 7b, d).

Among the similarities exhibited by certain Yaxche types to those of the Balche phase (e.g., with the Saxche orange polychrome type, Saxche variety, in Figure 7d) can be numbered the presence of decorative techniques such as orange slips, red and black lines encircling the rim, and the use of pseudoglyphs.

In my opinion, these similarities could perhaps be explained as stylistic traits that were still relatively nascent during the Balché phase but which then continued to develop during the subsequent Yaxche phase. This would be the most compatible scenario to explain the characteristics of the vessel displaying the

Itzam K'an Ahk name, since his reign is located precisely in the middle of the latter phase.

From an epigraphic point of view, this final possibility is for the moment the most plausible, since the hieroglyphic name mentioned on the vessel has not been found among any of the individuals who ruled during the interval specified for the Balche Phase. However, it is important to note that the hieroglyphic chronology of Piedras Negras falls silent between 9.5.5.0.0 and 9.8.10.6.16 (i.e., AD 539 to 603) possibly in reflection of powerful processes that have affected the site's history (Martin and Grube 2000:141; Peter Mathews, chronology provided to Ajimaya/INAH). This means that we cannot for the moment rule out the possibility that the Itzam K'an Ahk mentioned on this vessel corresponds to a hitherto unknown namesake, whose reign may have fallen at some point during this awkward interval of 64 years. However remote it may seem, such a possibility would then convert the Tabasco vessel into a unique record, one perhaps shedding light on a period about which we know very little for certain.

According to Muñoz (2003) and others (Arredondo 1998; Romero 1999), Yaxche phase ceramics have been found in all areas of Piedras Negras, including peripheral residential groups, in sealed contexts, below materials of unquestionably later date such as those of the Chacalhaaz phase. Most importantly, they have also been found in association with monuments bearing hieroglyphic dates. As Muñoz (2003) notes, at this time we begin to see a major distinction between the decorative techniques of the Yaxche phase and those that were in vogue in the central Peten and other areas of the lowlands, where positive-painting constituted the principal style of polychrome decoration. In Piedras Negras, on the other hand, "resist-decoration almost entirely replaced positive-painting as the primary style of polychrome decoration" (Muñoz 2003). Among these newer resist styles are Mataculebra Polychrome, Suktan Cream Polychrome, Lemba Polychrome, and Yokib Polychrome, with Santa Rose Cream Polychrome easily being the most numerous (Muñoz 2003) (Figure 7c). By contrast, although there remain some positive-painted polychrome types within the Yaxche phase, these constitute a minority. The more common types of positive-painted polychromes include Saxche Orange Polychrome and Palmar Orange Polychrome (Figures 7a-b).

To summarize, of all the varieties tested it is the many fragments of the resist-decoration variety documented by Muñoz (2003)—i.e., the Palmar Orange Polychrome type—which are most analogous to the vessel under study here. The comparison obtains equally well whether we consider decorative techniques, color palette, epigraphic style, or iconography.

Paleographic analysis

There are two aspects worth emphasizing in any comparison between the palaeographic characteristics of

the signs contained on the vessel itself, on the one hand, and between these and such signs as appear on ceramic sherds of known archaeological provenance belonging to the Yaxche phase (Palmar Orange Polychrome type) of Piedras Negras. First, one must establish whether or not the authentic hieroglyphs of the rim text were painted by the same scribe responsible for the two columns of pseudoglyphs. Second, it must be determined whether there are grounds for associating the epigraphic style and tradition of the vessel under consideration with those of a particular type within the ceramic sequence of Piedras Negras.

Significantly, Muñoz (2003) has noted in this regard that "the most common decorative motif consists of columns of pseudoglyphs marked by red and black lines," a characteristic already highlighted by Houston (personal communication 2007) as one of the principal features of the vessel in question because it contains two vertical columns of decorative pseudoglyphs, albeit in a somewhat uncommon form, and simultaneously contains a horizontal band of authentic writing in its rim text. Disconcertingly, the hand(s) involved in both sections display(s) features so similar as to support the hypothesis that both were performed by a single artist-scribe.

A detailed analysis of the two columns reveals that two of the signs involved in the dedicatory formula from of the upper band (in epigraphic context) are repeated in the columns of pseudoglyphs below (in iconographic context). The first of these is T507 **tzi** (Figure 8a), where the iconographic version represents in reduced and simplified form the same attributes of the written grapheme. This phenomenon can perhaps be explained by the difficulty of representing in a much smaller space all of the distinctive hallmarks of the sign, including its divergent diagonal rows of dots. The second sign, T178 or T534 **la**, corresponding to position E in the hieroglyphic text of the dedicatory formula, is repeated in the other pseudoglyph column with calligraphic attributes virtually identical to those of the written grapheme (Figure 8b), giving support to the idea of a single artist-scribe responsible for carrying out both text and decorations. If so, this would be an interesting result in view of the debate over whether the numerous pseudoglyphs known from the corpus of Maya ceramics are indeed the products of illiterate artists or whether, on the contrary, we must understand them as a manifestation of a deep-rooted tradition whose importance eventually imposed itself on scribes, obligating them to respect certain decorative canons that, at least to our eyes, appear as "incorrect" imitations of actual glyphs. In my opinion, both alternatives seem useful in explaining the diversity of cases and should not be considered mutually exclusive.

Regarding the comparison of paleographic evidence from the vessel under consideration with that from

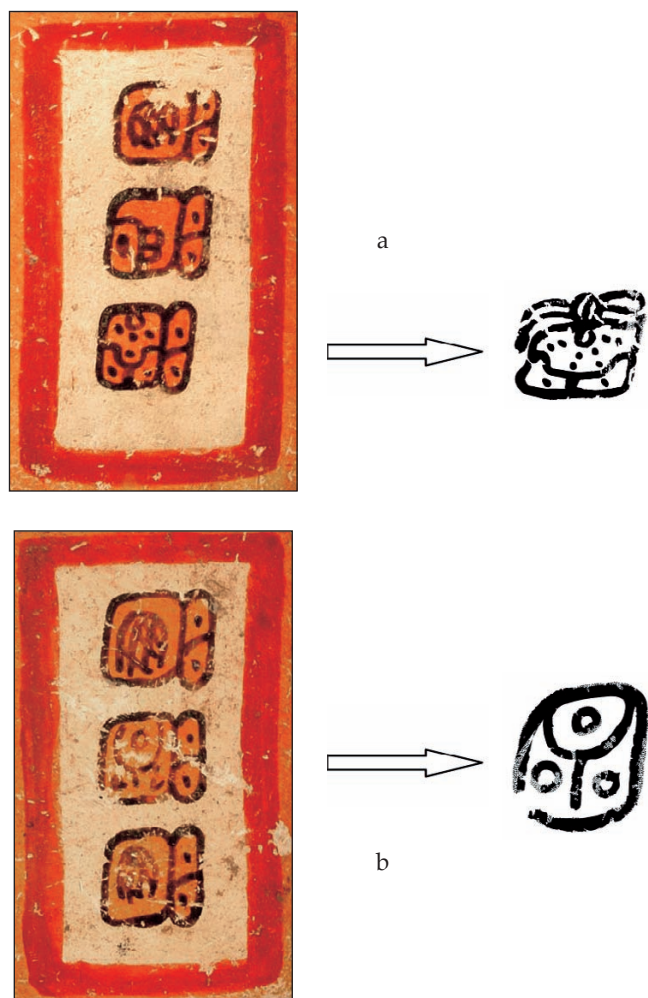


Figure 8. Use of similar elements in decorative pseudoglyphs (left) and hieroglyphic dedicatory formula (right): (a) comparison of sign T507 *tzi* in iconography and text; (b) comparison of T534/178 *la* in iconography and text (drawings and photographs by Carlos Pallán, Ajimaya/INAH).

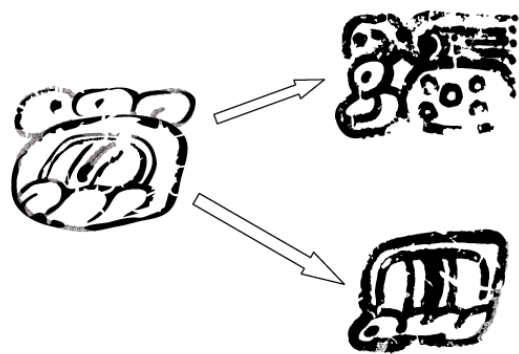


Figure 9. Comparison of signs T61 *yu* and T565 *ta*: (left) *yu-ta* sequence on Palmar Orange Polychrome sherd, Palmar Resist-Reserve variety; (right) *yu-k'-bi* and *ta* on the Tabasco vessel (drawings by Carlos Pallán, Ajimaya/INAH).

controlled archaeological contexts from the site of Piedras Negras, with an eye towards additional arguments in support of the dating and provenance of the former, it is worth noting that the dedicatory formula contains two signs which also appear on a Yaxche Phase Palmar Orange Polychrome sherd, variety Palmar Resist-Reserve (Muñoz 2003). The coinciding signs allowing ready comparative analysis are T61 *yu* and T565 *ta* (Figure 9). Both examples are from similar epigraphic contexts, within dedicatory formulas. Although both signs appear together in the sequence *yu-ta* in the fragment analyzed by Muñoz (2003), in the Tabasco vessel they appear separated in positions D and G respectively.⁴ The comparison reveals that both signs exhibit similar characteristics in each of the two contexts, typical of the Late Classic, and their rough contemporaneity cannot be excluded, although the handwriting of the sherd seems to show greater affinity with calligraphic variants relatively common in the central Petén (e.g., similar to T565 signs in the dedicatory formulae on K5453 and K8008).

In general terms, the sherd appears to exhibit a higher level of calligraphic skill and ornamental flair than the vessel, as it shows greater variation in the use of different qualities and weights of line, including ultrafine double contour lines, as well as greater movement and fluidity in the lines. More specifically, the T61 sign from the vessel emphasizes the lower and upper segments in the form of volutes, at the expense of a reduction in the size of the central segment. By contrast, the three segments of T61 on the sherd exhibit a greater symmetry. With respect to T565, the lower portion reveals several similarities between the sherd and the vessel, while the three curving parallel lines of the upper segment (the so-called “brightness marker” or “mirror”) are oriented differently on the sherd as compared with the vessel.

Overall, those signs susceptible to comparison suggest that the scribes involved belonged to slightly different scribal schools, although there are no substantial differences which would cast doubt on their relative contemporaneity and/or association within the same site. As for the sherd, this seems to betray a major influence from the central Petén, which would make sense if we consider it to date to slightly before the vessel but within the same phase, since it is precisely from the outset of Yaxche that stylistic differentiation from previous Petén-area influences first becomes noticeable (Muñoz 2003). In my opinion, the vessel under discussion may perhaps reflect a particular moment in the history of Piedras Negras during which the emergence of strongly local styles and traditions was only beginning.

⁴ *yu-ta* is an abbreviated spelling of *yutal* which can be analyzed as *y-ut-al*, ERG3s-seed/fruit-POS, “its fruit,” according to Lacadena (2002:184).

Conclusions

The hieroglyphic text of the vessel clearly provides the name of a Piedras Negras ruler called Itzam K'an Ahk. Of the three possible candidates attested in the site's dynastic sequence (Martin and Grube 2000:138-153), it is possible to discount the two earlier candidates because the vessel's handwriting clearly shows features characteristic of the Late Classic, while other characteristics of the piece are consistent only with those described for later stages of the ceramic sequence of Piedras Negras. However, this analysis cannot exclude the possibility that the vessel records a previously unknown ruler with this name who may have reigned during the hieroglyphic hiatus between AD 539 and 603.

Nonetheless, considering the epigraphic data in tandem with archaeological evidence, it would appear that the most viable option is to locate the object during the Yaxche ceramic phase, between AD 620 and 750, perfectly compatible with the period during which Itzam K'an Ahk III ruled Piedras Negras, between AD 639 and 686.

During this period, epigraphic evidence strongly links Piedras Negras to the political hegemony exercised by Yuknoom the Great in the Peten, the Petexbatun, and the Usumacinta, although it remains difficult to specify whether the technical and stylistic departure of the Yaxche phase from its earlier Peten model, first perceived by Muñoz (2003), somehow corresponds to Calakmul's noticeable loss of hegemony in the Usumacinta region in the wake of the defeat of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' of Calakmul at the hands of Jasaw Chan K'awiil of Tikal, an event that undoubtedly impacted dramatically on the balance of power between Piedras Negras and other sites in the Usumacinta, such as Yaxchilan, Lacanha, Bonampak, Palenque, and Pomona, among others.

With regard to the function of this vessel, there are two hypotheses that, in light of the data presented, seem most likely at the present time:

1. The vessel was produced for the personal use of Itzam K'an Ahk III, functioning perhaps as elite serveware and subsequently reused in a funerary context, as indicated by many similar attested cases. This would suggest that the vessel originated in Piedras Negras, Guatemala.
2. The vessel was produced at the behest of Itzam K'an Ahk III to be given as a gift to an individual who enjoyed his favor, functioning as prestige goods for exchange purposes (Reents-Budet 1994:374-375; Pallán 2006:90, 131). This would imply that the vessel did not necessarily come from Piedras Negras, but may instead have been transported during the Late Classic to one of the sites under the direct control of Ruler 2, or even to a site with which Piedras Negras enjoyed a political and/or military alliance of some kind.

Given that Piedras Negras Panel 2 could well indicate the dominion of Piedras Negras over the sites of Lacanha, Bonampak, and Yaxchilan during the reign of Itzam K'an Ahk III—to follow one of two possible interpretations offered by Martin and Grube (2000:144)—one cannot completely rule out the story that the Tabasco vessel was indeed found at Yaxchilan, as told by the donor of the object to the guardian of the public library where it is presently housed.

As mentioned earlier, however, this story should be taken with great reservations, given the obvious difficulties involved in any attempt at confirmation, and while it would be attractive to propose that the vessel could have been donated by Itzam K'an Ahk III to the same young lord of Yaxchilan who appears in a gesture of submission to him on Panel 2, the possibility that it was looted from Piedras Negras is far more likely.

The unfortunate result of the looting that affects pieces like this one is that we may never know their origins or full significance for certain. Devoid as they are of original archaeological context, we must be content with what little we can reconstruct of their intrinsic epigraphic and ceramic significance, in combination with the relatively abundant comparative evidence at our disposal. Thus, it is not unlikely that within the court of one of the largest cities ever established on the Usumacinta, the powerful Itzam K'an Ahk III had the opportunity on more than one occasion to lift this magnificent vessel to his lips, sampling the doubtless exquisite cocoa it once held.

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Palenque in 1979: Photos by Dale Hinkley (Part One)











