



Glyph Dwellers

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Two New Syllables from Maya Painted Ceramic Vessels

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One of the largest groups of painted Maya ceramics is attributed to El Zotz region, known to the ancient Maya as Pa'chan (Houston 2008). This corpus contains several hundred objects, which probably indicates their mass production during Late Classic period, 600-900 CE. The variety of graphemes that were employed in El Zotz style ceramics, principally in the Primary Standard Sequence (PSS) (see Coe 1973) or Dedicatory Formula (see Stuart 2005), is so extensive and inventive that it becomes possible to find new allographs or graphic variants of previously known syllables or logograms of a regular shape.

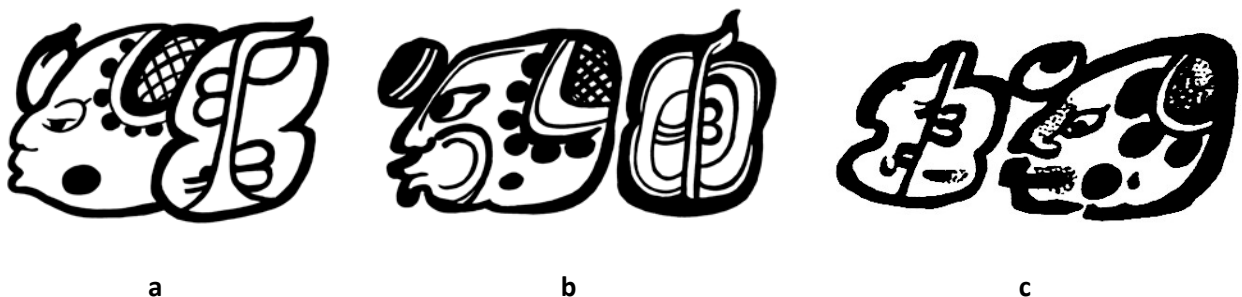


Fig. 1. Primary standard sequence dedication verbs from El Zotz-style vessels showing the “gourd” grapheme as yi. **a.** Chrysler Museum of Art 76.23.43, drawing by Yuriy Polyukhovych; **b.** PC.M.LC.cb2.16.2 (Hellmuth Archive), drawing by Yuriy Polyukhovych; **c.** Kerr 5509 (lid), after Coe 1973:no. 38.

One unusual allograph of the syllable **yi** appears in the context of the PSS dedication verb on Kerr 1092 (Museum of Fine Arts Boston 2003.775), Kerr 5509 (lid), Kerr 9061, Kerr 9254, PC.M.LC.cb2.16.2 (Hellmuth Archive, Dumbarton Oaks) and Chrysler Museum of Art (Norfolk, Virginia) 76.23.43 (Fig. 1; see Looper and Polyukhovych 2016). The main sign in each case is a grapheme visually similar to T1000 **AJAW**, but obviously having a different value in this context. On the example from Kerr 5509 (lid), the inscription is written backwards, which is typical for El Zotz area ceramic vessels. The grapheme looks similar to T370 **tzu**, but is used consistently in different contexts. In addition to the PSS dedication verb, it is also used to spell the term **jay** “vessel” on PC.M.LC.cb2.421.1 in the Hellmuth archive (Fig. 2). All of the known examples of this grapheme appear on vessels in the El Zotz style.



Fig. 2. U-ja-yi sequence from El Zotz style vessel (Hellmuth Archive PC.M.LC.cb2.421.1) showing “gourd” grapheme as **yi**. Drawing by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

Another rare **bi** or **ba** syllable appears on several vessels in the El Zotz or related styles. This grapheme depicts a peccary head with a broad snout, hairy cheek, and ear so common in the Maya art and script. On a vessel possibly from the same region or neighboring Hix Witz (Sapote Bobal - El Pajaral) and now in a private collection (Kerr 1836), it is used as **bi** in the dedication verb **tz’i-bi-na-ja**, *tz’ihbnaj* “it is painted” (Figs. 3, 4). The same grapheme appears on three other vessels in the El Zotz style. In each of these instances, the peccary head is used as **ba** in **u-tz’i-ba-li**, *utz’ihbal* “its painting” (Kerr 3459, 5452, 7220).



Fig. 3. Bi/ba grapheme in **tz’i-bi-na-ja** sequence from El Zotz style vessel (Kerr 1836). Drawing by Yuriy Polyukhovych.



Fig. 4. Polychrome vessel Kerr 1836. Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr.

It is interesting to note that artists from Hix Witz area frequently used both common phrases from PSS: **tz'ihbnaj** (typical for Nakbe and Xultun styles) and dedication verb + **utz'ihbal** (typical for Central Peten and Usumacinta region). On Kerr 8665 they used two forms at once (**u-tz'i-bi-na-ja** and **tz'i-ba-na-ja**). On Kerr 3026 it is written **u-tz'i-ba-li-na-ja**, which probably indicates that the scribe tried to use both variants or was confused. Therefore, the precise identification of this sign eludes us for the moment. In any case it is either syllabic **bi** or **ba**.

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