



Glyph Dwellers

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Representing the Household on Vase K2914 (Denver Art Museum)

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In 2015, we had the opportunity to examine and photograph the collection of Maya art in the Denver Art Museum. Among the many well-known works in this museum is the large polychrome ceramic vase 2003.1, which depicts a domestic scene with multiple individuals and an array of tribute items, also known by its number in the Kerr archive, K2914 (Fig. 1; Kerr 1990:297). The inscription on the vessel has been discussed by several scholars, including Reents-Budet (1994:130, fig. 4.22), Donatiello (2005), Tokovinine and Beliaev (2013:179), Beliaev (2014), and Pillsbury et al. (2017:Cat. 141). Like the Komkom vase (Helmke, Hoggarth, and Awe 2018:20–22), the inscription of this vessel is presented in three “fonts.” The first (medium-sized) font that encircles the rim is the dedicatory sequence. It names the vessel’s owner in the as Naahbnał K’inich,¹ who is a *lakam* or district governor of the Río Azul area (Lacadena 2008:27-28; Tokovinine and Beliaev 2013:179; see also Tsukamoto and Esparza Olguín 2015; Tsukamoto et al. 2015). He also bears a title of some geopolitical reference: Jo’ T544.501-ni (see Tokovinine 2013:110-112). Other more obscure titles he has are: Jo’ Ch’e’n “5 caves?” and Balu’n Tz’apal K’uh “9 planted gods.” The fact that the dedicatory sequence of this vessel refers to Naahbnał K’inich implies that secondary lords or governors could patronize artists of the highest caliber.

A second, larger “font” is employed for the vertical column of 6 glyphs that continues the dedicatory sequence. This passage describes the connection between Naahbnał K’inich and another person of higher rank, named Yukno’m K’awiil. It begins with a relationship glyph which seems to read **u-ki-ta**, or

¹ In this interesting example, the “*naahbnał*” component of the governor’s name is spelled **NAAH/na-ba NAL**. This is analogous to *baahkab* titles, which alternate **BAAH-ka-ba** and **ba-ka-ba** spellings. Incidentally, the **ba** element of his name has the expected arcing infix, rather than hatching. It is therefore clearly T501 rather than **HA’**, as other scholars have sometimes interpreted it.



ukiit, and which Dorie Reents-Budet (1994:130) suggested translating as “his patron.” An alternative suggestion is that the relationship on the vase is *utat*, “his father” (Tokovinine 2013:111). However, this would not only be extremely unusual but would also assume a scribal error. In the inscriptions, **u-ki-ta** expressions usually occur in northwest Yucatan at sites like Chichen Itza, where they connect individuals whose familial relationship is not otherwise documented or structures belonging to individuals (Grube 1994:324–325). At Palenque, on the inscribed earflare from Pakal’s tomb, **u-ki-ti** is used to relate two otherwise unknown individuals, Yopaat K’ahk’ UK’inil Chaahk and K’inil ? ajaw (Polyukhovych 2012:497). The glyph thus relates Naahbnaal K’inich to Yukno’m K’awiil in an unclear manner.

The next three blocks consist of titles that confirm the high status of Yukno’m K’awiil. First is “Río Azul” *baahkab*. During the Late Classic period, when this vase was commissioned, the rulers of Río Azul were not referred to as *k’uhul ajaw* or “holy lords,” as at many other sites, but “Río Azul” *baahkab*, as on Río Azul Stela 2 (Fig. 2). Therefore, there is no doubt that Yukno’m K’awiil was a member of the local dynasty. Based on present data, however, this ruler cannot be placed in the Río Azul dynastic sequence (see Beliaev 2017). In the context of the Denver Art Museum vase, the mention of this illustrious person to whom the vessel’s owner was somehow related may constitute an attempt by the governor Naahbnaal K’inich to aggrandize himself. This would also explain the choice of a large-size “font” for the presentation of this critical information.



Fig. 1. Ceramic vase, Denver Art Museum 2003.1. Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr (K2914).



Fig. 2. “Río Azul” *baahkab* title from Río Azul Stela 2. Photo by “Atlas Epigráfico de Petén” Project, CEMYK; courtesy of the Dirección de Patrimonio Cultural y Natural, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala.

On the Denver Art Museum vase, Yukno’m K’awiil also has two toponymic titles associated with Río Azul and Los Alacranes, Jo’ Pet and Hux Haabte’ (Beliaev 2017; Reents-Budet 1994:130; Tokovinine 2013:17–18). The toponyms and titles that appear on this vase also occur on other unprovenanced vessels, such as K1383, which are stylistically similar to it (Fig. 3; Matteo and Krempel 2011). They also appear on sherds excavated at Río Azul (Fig. 4).

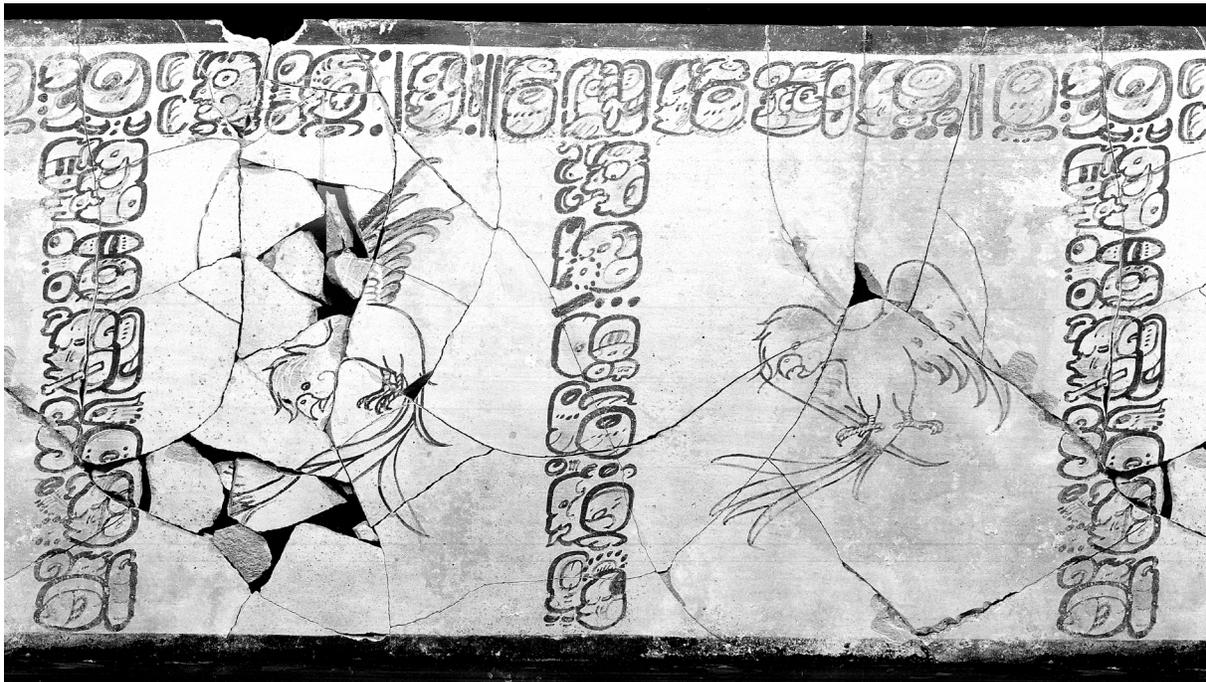


Fig. 3. Ceramic vase, K1383. Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr.

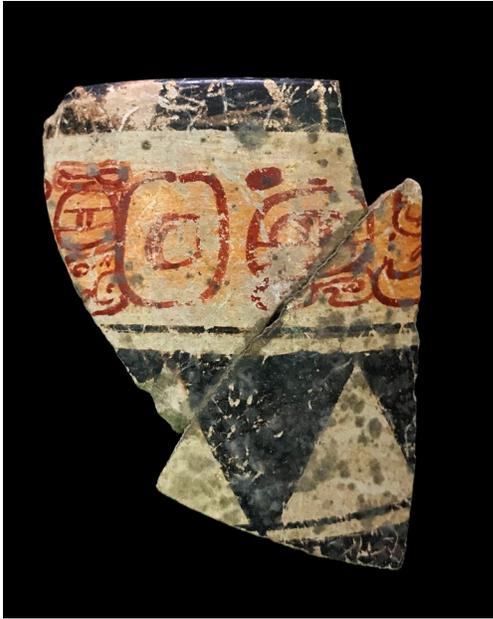


Fig. 4. Details of Juleki Cream sherds, Río Azul type collection. Photographs by Yuriy Polyukhovych.



Fig. 5. Speech of figure on lower register, K2914.²



Fig. 6. Captions for bags of beans, K2914.



Fig. 7. Caption for seated figure on left, K2914.



Fig. 8. Caption for basket, K2914.



Fig. 9. Caption for figure next to basket, K2914.

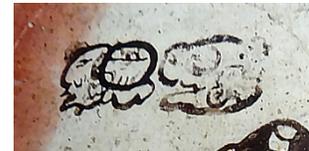


Fig. 10. Caption for women, K2914.

² Photographs of captions by Yuriy Polyukhovych and Matthew Loooper.



The secondary inscriptions on this vase (written in a third, very small “font”) are diverse, labeling objects and persons and also recording speech. In the lower register, an official seated amongst an array of tribute items is saying: *tz’akbaj*, “are lined up” followed by **ke-le** (Fig. 5). While this **ke-le** might be an abbreviation for *kele’m*, referring to the assembling of the tribute items by males (Donatiello 2015), it is also possible that it is spelling *kele’* “cargo.” In Ch’orti’, *kerejb’a* means “carry, drag out, drag, pull, haul, carry on the shoulders” (Hull 2016:194). In Ch’olti’, *queleb* is “hombro” (“shoulder,” Morán 1935:36). Thus, the tribute items that are lined up may be referred to literally as things that were carried on the shoulders. Among these items are the three white sacks that are twice labeled *kabu’l* “our beans” and once *hux kabu’l* “lots of our beans” (Fig. 6; Lacadena and Wichmann 2004:139; Velásquez García 2006:4, fig. 7).

On the upper platform, the seated figure to the left is perhaps named Yok Waal (Fig. 7). Before him is a plaited object labeled *chaahch* “basket” (Fig. 8; Houston, Robertson, and Stuart 1998:279). The large figure next to the basket is given only a title *baah ajaw* “first lord,” a title that appears in various inscriptions, most famously with reference to Chak Suutz’ of Palenque (Fig. 9; Houston and Stuart 1998:79, fig. 5). On the right hand side of the upper level are two women. The one positioned toward the front is possibly named Lady Chan Ahk (Fig. 10). In front of the women, seated together in a tightly-knit group are four males. The first part of the caption in front of them reads *chan noj to’b*, while the second part reads: *yichnal usaku’n* “in front of the older brother(s)” (Fig. 11). While it is possible that the first part of the caption names the short individual in the front of the group, it could instead refer to “four big flower buds,” since two of the males in the group sniff flowers. In Yucatec, *top’* is “flor, capullo de algodón” and *toop’* is “capullo de cualquier flor” (Barrera Vásquez, Bastarrachea Manzano, and Brito Sansores 1980:807). In the context of the vase, it makes sense that the flowers are located *yichnal usaku’n* “in front of [the faces] of the older brothers.”

Finally, we come to the caption associated with the focal figure in the composition, whose elevated status is signified by his open gesture and the mirror and covered vase placed before him. The caption names him as the same individual who is stated to be the owner of the vase in the dedication sequence above, Naahbnaal K’inich (Fig. 12). His *lakam* title at block U is spelled strangely, probably owing to a copying error involving a reduplication of the **chi** syllable from the previous block, followed by a correction using a **ma** complement. Tokovinine and Beliaev (2013:179) observed the presence of *yotoot* before his name, indicating that this is the “house” of Naahbnaal K’inich. When examining this vase in person, we noticed that—unless this is another copying error—the introductory glyph for this caption is not *ubaah* as seen in the caption to the right, but *ubaahil a’n*. This term is composed of five graphemes: T13 **u** to the left, T757 **BAAH**, T60c **hi** above, and then the ‘number tree’ **A’N** merged with T757 **BAAH**. Below is the complement T151 **nu**. The components of the ‘number tree’ are faint, but we could make out the remains of several numerals in the upper part of the T757 grapheme. The configuration of this glyph block is therefore similar to the **u-BAAH-hi-A’N-nu** expression on the side of Copan Altar O’ (Morley 1920:pl. 9f).



Fig. 11. Caption in front of group of males, K2914.



Fig. 12. Caption associated with principal individual, K2914.

The precise decipherment and interpretation of the *ubaah*-‘number tree’ have been problematic, partly owing to the difficulty of reconstructing the meaning of the term spelled using the ‘number tree’ grapheme or its substitute **a-nu**. One proposal is that *a’n* relates to terms for “exist” in several lowland Mayan languages (Lacadena and Wichmann 2004:137). In their initial discussion of the *ubaah*-‘number tree’ collocation, Houston and Stuart (1996:298, fig. 7) noted that it often refers to the impersonation of deities by rulers, as it typically is followed by the name of a deity and often appears as a caption to an image of a ruler dressed in the guise of this deity. Their interpretation of the collocation as impersonation hinges upon the translation of the term *baah* as “body”: “Textual allusions to the ‘body,’ *baah*, as part of this impersonation point directly to the transcendent merger of supernatural and human identity, to say nothing of further linkages with community deities” (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:66). However, the example from the Denver vase, in which the *ubaah*-‘number tree’ expression is followed not by the name of a deity, but by a prosaic reference to the house or palace of a governor, suggests that the expression sometimes may not literally reference concepts of “head” or “body,” but may have a more general meaning of “representation.” In surviving texts, such a usage is very rare. Indeed, in nearly all examples of *ubaahil*-‘number tree’ that are legible, a deity name follows, suggesting the more specific meaning of “impersonation” in such cases.

Table 1. Transcription and translation of text on K2914 (Denver Art Museum 2003.1).

Dedicatory sequence

A	a-AL-ya	alay	here
B	T’AB?-yi	t’abaayi?	gets dedicated ‘raised, appeared’?



C	u-tz'i-bi	utz'ihbnajal	its writing/painting
D	na-ja-la	"	"
E	yu-k'i-bi	yuk'ib	his drinking vessel
F	ti-yu-ta-la	ti yutal	for fruity/tasty
G	ka-ka-wa	kakaw	cacao
H	NAAH/na-ba-NAL	naahbnaI	NaahbnaI K'inich
I	K'IN-ni	k'inich	"
J	chi-la-LAKAM-ma	" lakam	" <i>lakam</i> [governor]
K	5-?-ni	jo' ?	5 ? [title]
L	5-CH'E'N?-na	jo' ch'e'n?	5? [title]
M	9-tz'a-pa-la-K'UH	balu'n tz'apal k'uh	many planted gods [title]
O1	AJ ?	aj ?	he of Río Azul
O2	u-ki-ta	ukiit?	his ?
O3	yu-ku-no-ma	yukno'm	Yukno'm K'awiil
O4	K'AWIIL	k'awiil	"
O5	nu-?	?	Río Azul
O6	ba-ka-ba	baahkab	<i>baahkab</i> [title]
O7	5-5-PET-3-HAAB-TE'	jo' pet hux haabte'	5 provinces, Hux Haabte' [toponyms]
Secondary texts			
P	yo-ko	yok	Yok Waal?
Q	wa-li?	waal?	"
R	BAAH-AJAW-wa	baah ajaw	first ajaw
S	cha-chi	chaahch	basket
T1	u-BAAH-hi-A'N-nu	ubaahil a'n	it is a representation of
T2	yo-OTOOT-ti	yotoot	his house
T3	NAAH-ba-NAL	naahbnaI	NaahbnaI K'inich
T4	K'IN-ni-chi	k'inich	"
U	LAKAM?-ma	lakam?	<i>lakam</i> [governor]?
V	5-?-ni	jo' ?	5 ? [title]
W1	u-BAAH-hi	ubaah	it is the image
W2	4-na-no-jo	chan noj	of four big
W3	to-ba	to'b	flower buds?
W4	yi-chi-NAL	yichnaI	in front of
W5	u-sa-ku-na	usaku'n	his older brothers
X	ix-CHAN-na	ix chan	Lady Chan Ahk?
Y	AHK?	ahk?	"



Z	tz'a	tz'akbaj	it was lined up
A'1	ka-ba-ja	"	"
A'2	ke-le	kele'	cargo?
B'	ka-bu-la	kabu'l	our beans
C'	ka-bu-la	kabu'l	our beans
D'	3-ka-bu-la	hux kabu'l	lots of our beans

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