



Glyph Dwellers

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A Travertine Vessel with a Ballgame-Related Inscription

Matthew Looper

Department of Art and Art History, California State University Chico

Yuriy Polyukhovych

Faculty of History, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

In 2018, researchers of the El Peru-Waka Archaeological Project made the important discovery of a fragment of an inscribed alabaster or travertine vase fragment dating to the Late Classic period (**Fig. 1**). The surviving image shows the lower part of a robed figure, probably female, while two text fragments appear to the right and left. On the left survives a single block consisting of the term *yajawk'ahk'*, a priestly title (Pérez Robles et al. 2019:fig. 2.7). Individuals wearing headdresses associated with the *yajawk'ahk'* title sometimes appear in ballgame contexts (Barrois and Tokovinine 2005:30). On the right are the remaining fragments of a second text. The upper block (B1) consists of a reference to decapitation (*ch'ak ubaah*), while the lower one (B2) begins with the preposition *ti*, followed by **pi-tzi-la** (*pitzil* or *pitzal*), "ballplayer," a term which appears frequently in title sequences. As its excavators note in their report on this fragment, the reference to the ballgame in this text seems to correspond to the location where it was found, which was in association with a ballcourt.

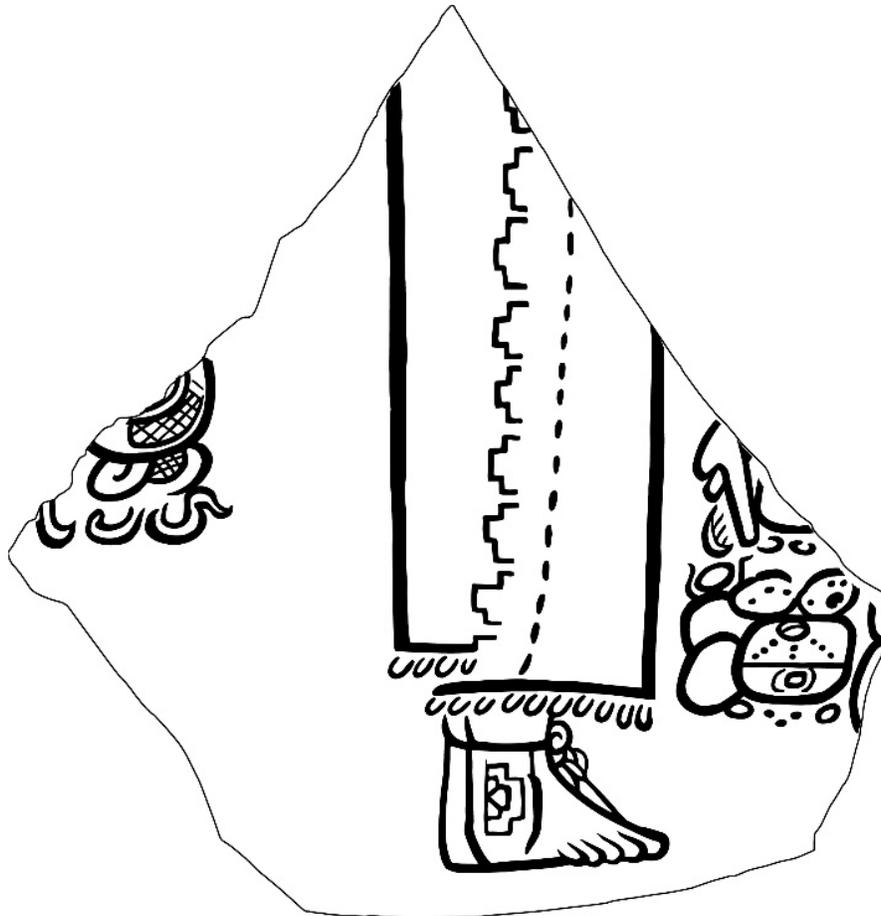


Fig. 1. Alabaster/travertine vase fragment from El Peru-Waka. Drawing by Dana Moot II, based on photograph by Juan Carlos Pérez (Pérez Robles et al. 2019:fig. 2.7).

As other researchers have noted, ballgame-related texts and images appear on various unprovenienced Late Classic travertine vases. These include a vase in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.2010.115.875) [K7749], which shows a dramatic scene of combat between individuals who stab each other with sharpened bones, supplied by elaborately dressed flanking figures (Fig. 2; Taube and Zender 2009). The text on this vessel adjacent to the rim refers to its owner as *baakte'* "head warrior" as well as *pitzil* "ballplayer." Another travertine vase in the Princeton University Art Museum (2002.370) [K3296] shows a frontal figure of the Copan ruler Yax Pasaj Chan Yopaat and an unnamed individual, represented in profile (Fig. 3; Whittington 2001:251). Both men wear elaborate costumes and hold eyeball-staffs or clubs in one hand and cloth-wrapped stones in the other. These weapons indicate that this image is related to ritual combat (Taube and Zender 2009). The associated text mentions two events, the first of which is the dance of Yax Pasaj *ti pitzil xu'* "as a ballplaying?" (Grube 1992). This is followed by an impersonation of a deity whose name begins with the numeral "7" followed by a portrait head depicting a deity with leaf-like forms projecting from its mouth (Tokovinine 2002). A *wa* complement in this instance suggests that the head would be read **AJAW**, with the leafy element representing **TE'** (Zender 2004). Thus, the entire name is probably Hukte' Ajaw, or "Seven Ajaw." This would be parallel to the character Wuqub Junajpu in the K'ichee' epic *Popol Vuh*, who is described as a ballplayer (Barrois and Tokovinine 2005; see also Coe 1989).



Fig. 2. Travertine vase, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.2010.115.875). Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr (K7749).



Fig. 3. Travertine vase, Princeton University Art Museum (2002.370). Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr (K3296).

As observed by Alexandre Tokovinine (2002), the same deity is said to be impersonated in other ballgame-related inscriptions, including the Hieroglyphic Stairway at El Peru and a vase from the Rio Azul area (K1383), where the Hukte' Ajaw name is followed by **ti-12-NAHB-ba**, "with/at the 12 handspans," an expression referring to the measurements of ballgame balls (see Barrois and Tokovinine 2005; Zender 2004). In this case, the leaf-like element painted on the deity's cheek probably serves as **TE'** (Fig. 4). A vase from the Naranjo area in the Art Institute of Chicago (K635) includes the same impersonation phrase followed by an expression that refers to three different ball measurements: **ti 12-NAHB-ba u-hi-HIX-li, 10-NAHB-ba u-hi-HIX-li, 9-NAHB-ba...** (Fig. 5, 6). The "hixil" term used here is difficult to interpret; however, it is probably of architectural significance, as following this is a section that reads: *ti*

k'ahn(al) hixil bihtuun, "at the stepped ? causeway."¹ It is interesting that both of these vases (K1383 and K635) have white backgrounds. As Christina Luke (2008:309) suggests, such coloration may be intended to mimic the appearance of travertine vases, and this seems particularly apt in these two instances, where the inscriptions refer to events that closely parallel those of certain travertine vessels.



Fig. 4. Ceramic vase. Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr (K1383).



Fig. 5. Ceramic vase, Art Institute of Chicago (1986.1080). Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr (K635).

¹ On *k'ahn* as a term for "bench, base, stone, chair, stair," see Lacadena (2004:176-177). On *bihtuun* as "causeway," see Stuart (2007).



Fig. 6. Detail of impersonation expression from ceramic vase, Art Institute of Chicago (1986.1080). Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr (K635).

Another example of the impersonation of Hukte' Ajaw appears on an unprovenanced travertine/alabaster vase in a private collection (**Fig. 7**). The vase has no surviving imagery but does include a text, somewhat eroded. This inscription is located near the rim of the vase, set off from the body by a rope-patterned band. The inscription is divided into three segments of four blocks each, which we have designated A-D, E-H, and I-L. The spaces between these segments could have originally included additional glyph blocks, but we could not see traces of them upon close examination. It begins with elements derived from the Primary Standard Sequence (PSS) or Dedicatory Sequence common on vessels of various types. In block A we can easily make out *yuk'ib* "his/her drinking vessel", followed by a T507 **tzi** sign at B. In the PSS, **tzi** or **tzi-hi** refers to the contents of the vessel. Next at C, the left-hand part of the block is eroded, while the element on the right side appears to be a human face with a curl in front of the forehead and a cleft on top, possibly **TI'**. An alternative is that this part of the block includes the maize god head **IXIIM**. The position of this block suggests that it might convey the first part of the name or titles of the vase's owner. At D and E are two more problematic compounds **YAX-PIK?-ko** and **5-AJAW-le**, which might be more names/titles of the vase owner. Following these at position F is the eroded remains of the "impersonation" expression, *ubaahil a'n*, followed at G by the **7-TE'-AJAW** nominal phrase. Even though the text has been partly effaced, the numeral "7" is clearly visible, as is the outline of the deity head (**AJAW**) and the leaf-like forms in its mouth (**TE'**). Like the examples mentioned above, the next block (H) is *ti pitzil*, "as ballplayer." At block I is a second "impersonation" expression *ubaahil a'n*, followed by a profile head at J with a protruding nose, a circle around its eye and a possible large ear marked with what may be a "darkness" sign. We tentatively suggest that this head depicts the monkey-scribe, who is often shown with a grotesque profile, circle around the eye, and a large "ear" marked with and "darkness" sign. If this identification is correct it would be yet another parallel to K635, which also mentions an impersonation of a deity whose name includes *ihk'* "darkness" *tahn* followed by



the name of the monkey-scribe (see Fig. 8). The *ihk'* "darkness" *tahn* compound appears on the "Vase of the Seven Gods" (K2796) and "Vase of the Eleven Gods" (Los Angeles County Museum of Art M.2010.115.14; K7750) with reference to the place where the gods are put in order; presumably, this is a term for the Maya Underworld (Grofe 2009; Polyukhovych 2013; Stuart 2017).

On the travertine vase, the last two blocks are quite damaged. K begins with *ti* followed by an unknown large oval sign, while L includes *o*, an eroded superfix, and a large oval sign, possibly *ta*. These might indicate the location where the second impersonation takes place. Alternatively, we have speculated that blocks K and L might have been *ti-tz'i-bi/ba o-to-ta* or *ti tz'ihbaal o'toot* "on the painted vase [dwelling]," possibly referring to a painted scene, perhaps on a plaster ground, that originally adorned the vase but has since disappeared.



Fig. 7. Travertine/alabaster vase, private collection. Photograph by Yuriy Polyukhovych.



Fig. 8. Detail of impersonation expression from ceramic vase, Art Institute of Chicago (1986.1080). Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr (K635).

In sum, the inscription of the travertine vessel in a private collection described here features numerous points of correspondence to the inscriptions on other "white" colored vessels that refer to ballgame-related rituals, particularly deity impersonation. This lends further support to the hypothesis that some travertine vessels (and imitations thereof) were employed in ballgame-related rituals. They could have been used in high-status feasting in association with ballgames, given as prizes to victors, or even been wagered on the outcome of games. Additional iconographic and epigraphic research as well as contextual data from archaeology may eventually clarify the relationship further.

Table 1. Text of incised travertine vase, Private collection. Photos by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

	<p>A</p>	<p>yu-k'i-bi</p>	<p>yuk'ib</p>	<p>his/her drinking vessel</p>
	<p>B</p>	<p>tzi</p>	<p>ta tzih</p>	<p>for "tzih"</p>



	C	_ TI'?	_ ti'?	_ Ti'?
	D	YAX-PIK?-ko	yax pikom/pikol?	Yax Pikom/Pikol?
	E	5-AJAW-le	ho' ajawlel	Ho' Ajawlel
	F	u-BAAH-li-A'N?	ubaahil a'n?	it is his/her image representing/ impersonating?



	G	7-TE'-AJAW	hukte' ajaw	Hukte' Ajaw
	H	ti-pi-tzi	ti pitzil	as ballplayer
	I	u-BAAH-li-A'N?	ubaahil a'n?	it is his/her image representing/ impersonating?
	J	CHUWEEN?	chuween?	Chuween?



	K	ti- _	ti _	in/at/on? _
	L	o- _ -ta?	-	-

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