



Glyph Dwellers

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A Maya Bowl at Smith College

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The collection of the Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton, MA includes a bowl with a mostly readable text (accession number SC 2016.66.20; **Figs. 1, 2**). It is decorated with an orange ground with details in red and black and a relatively large glyphic rim text painted in black. The lower zone of the composition consists of a series of stepped frets, suggesting a textile pattern, a symbol of wealth and luxury seen on vessels painted in various styles (**Fig. 3**). The text begins with a Primary Standard Sequence (PSS) Initial Sign (A), followed by the dedication verb spread across two blocks (B-C). Block D is **u-tz'i-ba** with a peculiar form of T1 **u**. As this block is not introducing a scribal signature, it is likely that it is an abbreviated form of *utz'ihbaal* 'its painting'. Block D is *yuk'ib* 'his drinking vessel'. The next two blocks (E-F) are reversed, with block F containing the preposition *ta*, while block E is *yutal*, spelled with a **ta** syllable similar to a T561 (XH3) **CHAN** 'sky' sign. The interpretation of *yutal* in ceramic texts is still problematic, with the most current proposal favoring 'fruit' or 'face', based on cognates in various Mayan languages, deriving from proto-Mayan **Haty* 'face' (Carter and Matsumoto 2020:109; Carter et al. 2021:6; Kaufman and Justeson 2003:324). On this bowl, the term may be a shortened form of *yutal kakaw* 'fruity cacao/cacao fruit', which appears on other vessels with more complete dedication texts. Blocks G-H provide the name of the vessel owner **CHAN-na a-ku** or Chan Ahk. This person cannot clearly be identified with a known individual in another text.

The last two blocks are problematic, possibly representing parts of the name or titles. Block I is **yu** over an unidentified oval grapheme, while the last block, J is **KAB**, literally 'earth', but used here in an unclear context. As it follows a presumed personal name, it is possible that this is a title, perhaps an abbreviated form of Wak Kabnal, a toponym associated with Naranjo rulers (Martin 1996:225–226).



Fig. 1. Pre-Columbian; Mayan, *Ritual Bowl*, 600-900, ceramic, 5 1/8 x 6 3/8 in., Gift of Fredrica Wachsberger in memory of Phyllis Williams Lehman, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, SC 2016.66.20.



Fig. 2. Pre-Columbian; Mayan, *Ritual Bowl*, 600-900, ceramic, 5 1/8 x 6 3/8 in., Gift of Fredrica Wachsberger in memory of Phyllis Williams Lehman, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, SC 2016.66.20.











Fig. 3. Polychrome vessel MS1190. Photograph by Ronald L. Bishop, courtesy Maya Ceramics Project.

A few bowls in various museum collections have epigraphic similarities to the Smith bowl but are not by the same artist. A close comparison can be made with K6167 (Los Angeles County Museum of Art 2010.115.560), which has been subjected to considerable repainting (**Fig. 4**). **Table 1** summarizes numerous points of similarity between corresponding glyph blocks in the two vessels. Other, more distant, comparisons may be suggested between these vessels and others, including MMC831473 and K4995 (**Figs. 5, 6**). Another is a bowl in the Museo Nacional de Arqueología e Etnología in Guatemala City (15889).



Fig. 4. Polychrome bowl Los Angeles County Museum of Art 2010.115.560; Kerr 6167. Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr.

Table 1. Comparison of selected glyph blocks of bowl at Smith College and K6167 (reordered). Photos of Smith Bowl by Matthew Looper; photos of K6167 by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

Smith Bowl	K6167	Comment
		upper part of T12 a with indentation on left, horizontal dividing line, and four curved "teeth" below
		enclosing frame around "step" component
		vertical fingers; scalloped shape of thumb; circular frame for chi
		u with darkened interior oval







		U-shaped elements
		head variant used



Fig. 5. Polychrome bowl Mint Museum 1983.147.3 (MMC831473). Photograph by Matthew Looper.



Fig. 6. Polychrome bowl Kerr 4995. Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr.




None of these vessels share names of their patrons, nor do they have any indication in their texts of their place of origin. The precise dating of these vessels is also challenging, but a late Early Classic (sixth century C.E.) estimate seems warranted, based on the use of U-shaped elements within graphemes such as T585 **bi**, the vertically positioned fingers of T671 **chi**, the prominent lower notch on the conflated T843 **T'AB?** and T18 **yi**, and the curls added to the T77 **k'i**. Another chronological anchor might be suggested by bowls from Naranjo associated with the late sixth-century reign of Aj Numsaaj Chan K'inich. Some of these, such as the bowl at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art 2010.115.756 (K6813), also show compositional similarities to K6167 (**Fig. 7**). This comparison also indirectly suggests a geographical origin for the Smith bowl as the eastern Peten, which would be consistent with the possible abbreviated Naranjo toponym in block K.







Fig. 7. Polychrome bowl Los Angeles County Museum of Art 2010.115.756; Kerr 6813. Rollout photograph by Justin Kerr.

In summary, the text of the Smith College bowl consists of a slightly abbreviated and reordered dedication sequence or PSS, stating that it was possibly a container for 'fruit' or 'cacao fruit' and that its owner was Chan Ahk, a person otherwise unknown (**Table 2**). The bowl has indirect stylistic connections with vessels from the Eastern Peten dating to the sixth century and may also contain an abbreviated title associated with Naranjo.





Table 2. Text of bowl (Pre-Columbian; Mayan, *Ritual Bowl*, 600-900, ceramic, 5 1/8 x 6 3/8 in., Gift of Fredrica Wachsberger in memory of Phyllis Williams Lehman, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, SC 2016.66.20). Photos by Matthew Looper.

	A	a-AL-ya	alay	here
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	B	T'AB?-	t'abaayich?	is dedicated?
	C	-yi-chi	"	"
	D	u-tz'i-ba	utz'ihbaal	its painting
	E	yu-k'i-bi	yuk'ib	his drinking vessel



	F	yu-ta	yutal	fruit?
	G	ta	ta	for
	H	CHAN-na	Chan	Chan Ahk
	I	a-ku	Ahk	"



	J	yu-??	??	??
	K	KAB	wak kabnal?	Wak Kabnal?

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