

Salvaging the Text of an Overpainted Maya Vase in the Yale Peabody Museum

Matthew Looper

Department of Art and Art History, California State University Chico

The collection of the Yale Peabody Museum in New Haven includes a heavily overpainted polychrome vase (accession number ANT.260305), formerly in the Peter G. Wray collection (**Fig. 1, 2**). Presumably it at one point had been in the possession of Lee Moore, judging from the sticker on its base. This object has already been identified as epigraphically and iconographically significant, but has mainly been studied through a set of photos by David Joralemon published in black-and-white in an essay by Dicey Taylor (1982) included in the Dumbarton Oaks volume *Falsifications and Misreconstructions of pre-Columbian Art.* Juxtaposing pre- and post-overpainting photos in her article, Taylor points out the damage done to the surfaces, including the total overpainting of the glyphic material.

Despite this, the photos by Joralemon provide enough data to study the form and content of its texts. For example, working from these photos, scholars have pointed out that this scene depicts preparations for an enema ritual that is set in a palace at Baaxwitz, a toponym associated with Xultun, in the eastern Peten region (Krempel and Matteo 2012:164). In the image, a woman bearing the title *ix baaxwitz ajaw*, 'lady Baaxwitz lord' offers a dish to a man seated on the throne next to her. The man, who holds an enema funnel or syringe in his right hand, leans forward to observe the performance of two musicians, playing rattles and a gourd rasp, who stand before him. The palace itself it fitted with a bench, a glyphic column, and curtains; and constricted-neck ollas (associated with enema ceremonies) and bundles are

¹ Other useful series of pre-repainting photos include a set taken by Nicholas Hellmuth (de Smet 1985:pl. 16).



placed before and beneath the bench. One of these bundles is labeled with a collocation that has been repainted as **2-PIK**, possibly indicating that it encloses 16,000 cacao beans.

The purpose of this note is to provide detail photos of the vase's inscriptions, taken during a visit to the museum in Spring 2023. These photos can be compared with the pre-repainting photos, thereby identifying the authenticity of each glyph block and providing a partial reconstruction of the text content. Even though every part of this vase's surface was seemingly retouched, the pre-overpainting photos, when compared with the vase today, provide the basis for comparison with other vases that allows for some hypotheses concerning its dating and political importance.



Fig. 1. Polychrome vase, Yale Peabody Museum ANT.260305. Height 21.4 cm, width 12.3 cm, rim diameter 12.3 cm. Pre-repainting photos by David Joralemon, after Taylor (1982:fig. 11,12,13). Reproduced with permission.





Fig. 2. Polychrome vase, Yale Peabody Museum ANT.260305. Height 21.4 cm, width 12.3 cm, rim diameter 12.3 cm. Photos by author.



Dedicatory Formula/PSS

Starting with the text painted adjacent to the rim, we see a dedicatory formula (or Primary Standard Sequence [PSS]). The top of the column directs the reader's eye to the first glyph in the sequence (A), which is a variant of the Initial Sign (alay) spelled using the 'GI' variant with **a** and **ya** complements. This exact combination of signs is widespread, though not particularly common, in the corpus, appearing both on monuments and carved and painted ceramics. Painted ceramic examples occur, for instance, on K0625, K1440, K4143, K7092, K8719, LC.cb2.6, and MS1839.

The second and third signs (B-C) in the series comprise the dedication verb. The first component (B) is mostly cut off in the pre-restoration photos but is fortunately still identifiable as a Maize God head (PL1b) main sign, plus two other signs, ZA2 la and ZU1s ja, to the right. The repainted version mostly accurately represents these three graphemes. PL1 functions in the script in several ways, including logographic NAH 'first' (PL1a), IXIM 'maize' (PL1b), JUN 'one' (PL1c), and syllabic na (PL1s). In the PSS context, its la complement suggests that it is probably also an allograph of K'AL (PL1d). The next block, C, is poorly preserved in the original, and subsequently, badly repainted. Based on comparisons with other vessels that use the same dedication verb, however, the identities of these signs can be reconstructed as 1M1 ji (possibly rendered as 1B9 yi) on the left, with the main sign being the personified agave plant SC9 chi. Read together, these two blocks represent k'ahlajich (or k'ahlayich), the passive form of k'al 'dedicate [make]' plus the enclitic -ich 'already' (Terrence Kaufman, cited in Stuart 2005:153). Figure 3 shows various likely K'AL logograms² with la complements, sometimes followed by -yi-chi, as well as a full syllabic spelling k'a-la-ja-u-hi-chi. Figure 4 shows examples of the PSS dedication verb having PL1d as the main sign.

a. k'a-la-ja-u-hi-chi	b. K'AL?-la-ja	c. K'AL?-la-ja	d. K'AL?-la-ja-yi-chi-ya	e. K'AL?-la-ja-yi-chi
MZ2-ZA2-ZU1s-	PT3-ZA2-	ZH9-ZA2-	ZH9-ZA2-ZU1s-1B9-	ZH8-ZA2-ZU1s-1B9-SC9
HE6-ZCCs-MR4s	ZU1s	ZU1s	MR4s-32A	
Vase, LC.cb4.50	"Altar" Vase,	Vase, K6419	Bowl, K9280	Bowl, K2774
	K3120			

Fig. 3. a. Full syllabic spelling of *k'ahlajich* on a vase from the Oxkintok area (photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Photo Archive, <u>www.Maya-archaeology.org</u> and Dumbarton Oaks, <u>www.doaks.org</u>); **b-e.** Probable **K'AL** logograms with la complementation from painted and carved vessels (**b**. drawing by Dana Moot II; **c**. photo by Matthew Looper; **d,e**. photos by Justin Kerr).

² Many of these examples come from Chocholá-style ceramics, where Grube (1990:324) and MacLeod (1990:508) observed that they likely substitute for the "flat-hand" T713a. For further discussion of the complex renderings of **K'AL**, see Mora-Marin (2023).



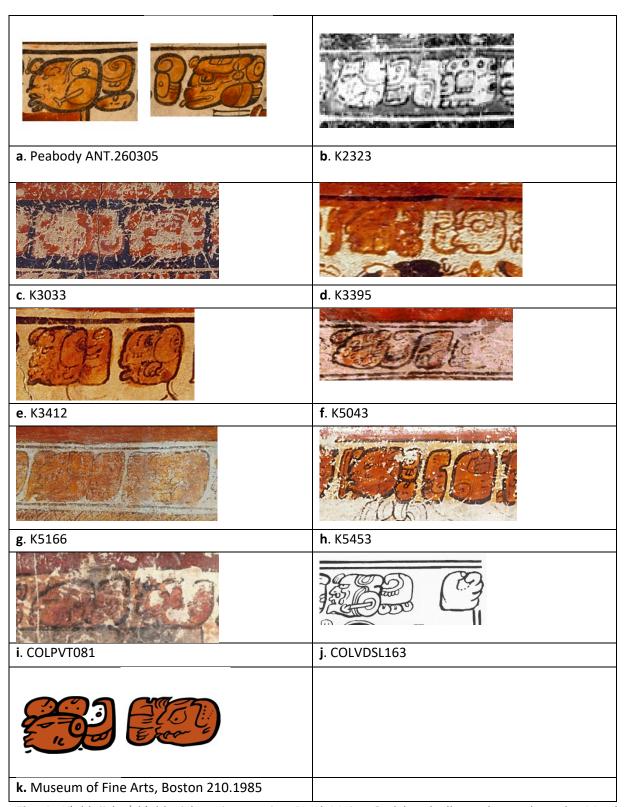


Fig. 4. *K'ahlajich / k'ahlayich* variants using PL1d Maize God head allograph. **a.** photo by Matthew Looper; **b-h.** photos by Justin Kerr; **i.** photo by Raphael Tunesi (Tunesi 2008); **j.** drawing after Robicsek (1978:fig. 163); **k.** drawing by Dana Moot II.



Continuing with the PSS, blocks D-G render the word *utz'ihbaal* 'its painting' using a series of four head-variant graphemes: PL1 **u**, AW2 **tz'i**, XE1s **ba**, and BV5 **li**. Identical sequences appear on pottery vessels in other styles (e.g. Denver Art Museum 1996.3, 1997.351, K1558, K5647, K8506, K8654, MS1095, K30161). Next (block H) is *yuk'ib* 'his/her drinking vessel' spelled with the grapheme PM4 for **UK'** 'drink', representing a human head with the glyph for "water" in its mouth. Lastly, block I is 1M1 **ta**, followed by a PL1 Maize God head, identified by the curl at the back of the head and forehead bead, and 2S2 **wa**. As this is the last block in the PSS, it is possible that the artist ran out of space and decided to compress **ta-IXIM-TE'-le-ka-ka-wa** into **ta-IXIM-wa**.

Secondary Texts

Moving onto the glyphs that appear as captions, we see two signs on the red-painted column. These are a bit difficult to make out in the pre-repainting photos, but the one on top (J1) might be the bar-and-dot numeral 9 followed by XH5s **wa**, 1SC **le**, and 2S2 **wa**. The glyph below (J2) is clearly the month Yaxk'in. The lack of a numerical coefficient in J2 suggests that the number 9 in block might be the day number for Yaxk'in, with no corresponding position in the 260-day cycle given. The problem, of course, is the role of the **wa**?-**le-wa** combination, which occupies the position of a numeral classifier, but cannot be explained at the moment.

The other secondary texts that float within the scene consist of two columns placed in front of the seated ruler (columns L and M) and a row of 3 glyphs in front of the woman, which, as mentioned above, identify her as a 'lady Baaxwitz [Xultun] lord'. As pointed out by Krempel and Matteo (2012:164-165), the last two glyphs of column M (M2-M3) can be identified as *uhtiiy baaxwitz*, 'it happened at Baaxwitz', indicating that the scene depicted takes place at Xultun polity itself. It should be noted that the repainting has particularly mutilated block M3, making it difficult to know what the sign below ZC2 **WITZ** originally was, though an **a** or **tzi** syllabogram might be possible.

The rest of the two columns is partially intelligible, though there are also problems with repainting. The pre-repainting photos clearly show that the first block in column L (L1) is PY3 **K'AY(OM)**, which identifies the rattle-playing personage to the left as a k'ayo'm or 'singer'. Rattle players are also depicted and/or referred to as singers elsewhere in Maya art, as on MS1086 and the Bonampak murals (**Fig. 5, 6**).







Fig. 6. Vase MS1086. Photo by Ronald L. Bishop.

Fig. 7. Bonampak, Room 1, detail East-South Wall showing rattle players, two of whom are entitled k'ayo'm, 'singer'. Mexico, Maya, 791 CE. (Reconstruction, Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Bonampak Documentation Project, illustrated by Heather Hurst and Leonard Ashby).

Next in block L2 is a rare sign that looks like ZR2 **lu** but has a constricted middle as well as a "plug"-like form at the top (ZR5). While it is possible that this sign is simply a conflation of **JUL** with **lu**, it seems more likely that this may be an example of a rare and undeciphered grapheme, otherwise known only from the text of vase K6020, where it appears as the first component in a couplet reading ZR5-**jo**, ZR5-**no**? (**Fig. 8**). While the text of K6020 might lead one to believe that ZR5 is a syllablogram representing **Co** [consonant-/o/], its stand-alone usage on the Peabody vase suggests that it instead may be a logogram.

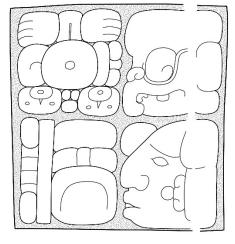






Fig. 8. a. Peabody Vase, L2 compared with: **b, c**. Vase, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 24/4313. (K6020), E2-F2. Photographs by Matthew Looper.

Next in this column (L3) is a block reading ma-tz'a-ja, clearly preserved in the pre-repainting photo. This looks like a passive verbal construction, possibly reading mahtzaj. This exact term is not known from other texts, but an entry in Ch'orti' may be significant: matz'a VT. umatz'i, matz'bir 'encantar, insinuar'; vi. majtz'a, amajtz'a 'encantar, insinuar'. E Maku majtz'a umen e Chika. 'Marcos fue insinuado por Francisca.' (Pérez Martínez et al. 1996:137). In the context of the depicted scene, this verb may therefore be referring to the enchanting quality of the music and the sensuousness of the scene in general, which involves the intimate and sexually-charged ritual of enema use (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:117, 122, 125). Another term in Ch'orti' might also be relevant: matz'b'ir 'invited' (Hull 2016:274). The ma-tz'a grapheme sequence does also appear at Palengue in a personal name, but here it is followed by Ia, and then WITZ' or HA' in the next block (Fig. 9; Polyukhovych 2012:423; Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2020:10-11). Although it requires more research, the first part of the name at Palenque could be analyzed as spelling the verbal root matz' with an -al adjectivizing suffix, resulting in a modifier for the noun witz' or ha'. The last block in column L on the vase (L4) is heavily overpainted, and only ZM1 ma is visible as a subfix in the pre-repainting photo.



Drawing by Yuriy Polyukhovych

Fig. 9. Nominal sequence with ma-tz'a-la (Block A1). Palengue House C east foundation. Drawing by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

The first glyph in the next column (M1) clearly begins with AA1s ka and ends with 1B2 ki, but the main sign is not clear in the original photos and is now heavily overpainted. The main sign is oval, containing a double-outlined smaller oval and with an indentation on its lower right side. These features suggest that it might be 1B9 vi, meaning that the whole glyph block might read ka-vi-ki. Interestingly, a-vi-ki appears on the "Itzamna Court Vase" in a couplet: ayik aal ayik maam(?) (Fig. 10; see Boot 2008; Coe and Houston 2018:pl. 18; Houston 2017).3 The context of the text suggests dialog between the depicted individuals, implying that a- is the second person singular pronoun and yik would be an unknown noun

³ Boot (2005) interpreted the "bird" sign here as **MAM** (BVD), which makes sense coupleted with aal, 'child'. However, the hairlike element that usually appears with MAM has been replaced by an element that looks more like the nasal emanation of the avian personification of **CH'EN** (BT6).



root or adjective modifying the following noun, i.e. 'your *yik* child/grandfather(?)'. Analogously, block M1 on the Peabody vase could be analyzed as *ka-yik*, in which *ka-* functions as the first-person plural pronoun, meaning "our *yik*." Although I cannot presently offer a convincing interpretation of the term *yik*, it is possible that both columns L and M record the speech of the seated protagonist as something like: "singer, ...is enchanted... our ??, it happens at Baaxwitz [Xultun]".



Fig. 10. Text of "Itzamna Court Vase", M3-M4. Drawing by Dana Moot II.

Dating, Origin, and Political Significance

Since the Peabody vase is unprovenanced, has no named individual owner or readable date, and has not been chemically sampled, its dating and origin must be ascertained by comparison to other vessels. Fortunately, its text is closely related to a vase that has been chemically sampled and bears a readable date (Fig. 11). This is the much-discussed vase K5453/MS0071, in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, that had also been sold by Lee Moore (accession no.: 2004.2204; https://collections.mfa.org/objects/459496). Numerous features connect these two vases, including their dimensions, which are almost identical. They have essentially the same composition, with an enthroned figure within a curtained palace setting, a glyphic column, a numbered cacao-bundle placed beneath the throne, and a PSS-rim text plus additional captions for the figures. Moreover, there are specific details of the PSS text that are distinctive and shared by the two vases, illustrated in Table 1. These include the use of SN1 in the PSS Initial Sign, the use of PL1 for the dedication verbal root, and most importantly, a very similar treatment of the personified XE1s ba and BV5 li and identical spellings of yuk'ib using logographic UK'. While related, it is clear from the execution of various details that these two vases are not by the same artist, but rather probably the same "workshop" or artistic circle.





Fig. 11. Vase, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 2004.2204. (K5453/MS0071). Photo by Justin Kerr.

Fortunately, much can be said about the social and political context of K5453, as it bears a complex, mostly readable text with Calendar Round dates and has been chemically sampled. The scene on K5453 shows the delivery of tribute by kneeling figures before a seated personage bearing the name/title Ch'ok Lamis, who carries a Tikal Emblem Glyph. The principal kneeling figure directly in front of the ruler is stated to be K'ahk' Hix Muut, a *yebeet* or emissary of the Calakmul king Yuhkno'm Yich'aak K'ahk'. The vertical text, which takes the form of a palace pier or pillar, records an event—possibly *k'al* 'dedicate [make] ' or 'wrap, bind'—by Ch'ok Lamis at Topoxte on 4 Ajaw 13 Keh. This event is usually interpreted as corresponding to 9.12.19.10.0 Oct 11, 691, because about four years later, in 695, Yuhkno'm Yich'aak K'ahk' was defeated by the king of Tikal, Jasaw Chan K'awiil (e.g. Tokovinine and Beliaev 2013:175). However, it can be noted that this vase probably dates to long after the late seventh century, as all other documented *yebeet* are from very end of the Late Classic, such as Bonampak Murals, Caracol

⁴ The second part of the name of this ruler is sometimes read as "wahyis," assuming that the upper-right hand sign in the block is ATK (superfix) WAY, rather than ZQ3 LAM. However, the two examples shown on K5453 have clear crossed-bands infixes and frames of 3 or 4 half-circles, which are typical of ZQ3. In contrast, ATK almost always has a "percentage sign" infix (with a few exceptions on monuments at La Corona and Tikal and rare ceramic examples, like K8425), and never has the half-circles. Further, ATK is often rendered with a shape that is like 3M1 SAK, whereas the examples on K5453 are more "bowl-shaped", like ZQ3. Moreover, there are almost no examples of ATK on ceramics that are not in the context of the Sak Wahyis title, which mainly appears in codex-style ceramics from Calakmul or the southern Mirador basin and is particularly prominent at La Corona (Barrientos Q., Canuto, and Stuart 2024; Velásquez García and García Barrios 2018). Unfortunately, there are few examples of ZQ3 in ceramic painting for comparison, and most are used on Ik'-style vessels to render the name of the ruler K'inich Lamaw Ek'.



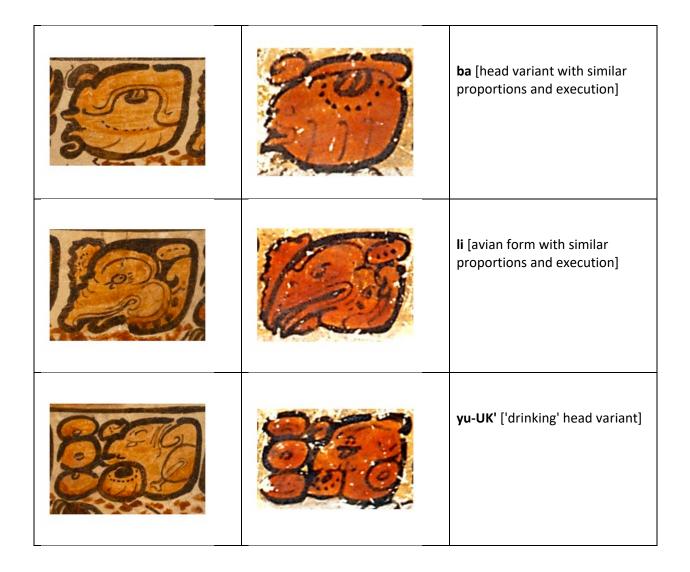
Caana stuccoes, as well as Museo Amparo throne. Therefore, I would argue that the date recorded here could refer as well to the period ending of 9.18.5.0.0 (4 Ajaw 13 Keh), which would have been the two-calendar round (2 x 2.12.13.0) anniversary of 9.12.19.10.0. The vase, therefore, might have been a commemorative work, created in 790, more than a century after the event depicted. Its political purpose was to celebrate retrospectively the ability of a Tikal ruler to attract tribute from Calakmul. Because of its close stylistic similarities to K5453, I argue that the Peabody vase was also painted ca. 790. Moreover, chemical testing of K5453 locates its probable place of production in the Lake Yaxhá-Tikal area, with particular similarity to samples from around Lake Peten-Itzá, including some from the Trinidad-Motul de San José area (Dorie Reents-Budet, pers. comm. 2023). This allows us to hypothesize that the Peabody vase was also created in this area of the Petén.

Table 1. Comparison of functionally equivalent blocks from Peabody vase and K5453/MS0071. Photos of Peabody vase by Matthew Looper; photos of K5453 by Justin Kerr.

Peabody	K5453/MS0071	Transcription and comment
32000		a-AL-(ya) [GI variant]
		K'AL?-la-ja [Maize god head variant and similar execution and arrangement of la and ja]

⁵ This information is also included on the MFA, Boston website for this work: https://collections.mfa.org/objects/45949.





If the image and text of K5453 suggest that it was created to make a political statement about Tikal-Calakmul relations more than a century in the past, one wonders if the Peabody vase likewise concerns late seventh century relations between Tikal and the site where the event painted on it takes place, Xultun. While this question cannot be answered without a clear understanding of the "Yaxk'in" date inscribed on the pillar, which should provide a date for the scene illustrated, it should be noted that overall, Xultun seems to maintain a close political affiliation with Tikal through much of the Classic period (Rossi, Stuart, and Saturno 2015:665). Textual references to this alliance appear on Xultun Stela 5 (501), Tikal Stela 17 (557), Xultun Stela 1 (ca. 600), and Xultun Stela 21 (ca. 650-700). So if the Peabody vase was painted to function within the political sphere of Tikal, possibly by a workshop in an outlying site near the lakes area to the south or southeast, its depiction of a ritual event at Xultun may reference the evident political alliance between the sites before ca. 700. Again, there is no direct evidence from the vessel that suggests its retrospective nature, so this idea remains purely hypothetical.

On the other hand, because the Peabody vase likely dates to the end of the eighth century, it is interesting to evaluate its possible political significance at the time of its creation. In fact, at Xultun in the decades prior to the painting of the vase, a series of four stelae celebrating a female ruler, Ix Yax



We'n Chahk, were dedicated between 761-780? in association with Structure 11K17 (Fig. 11; Rossi and Stuart 2020). The stelae feature portraits of this royal woman performing public dances accompanied by dwarfs and holding jaguar and serpent effigies. The same woman is named as the owner of at least two known vases (Hurst and Beltrán 2020:209–211; Krempel, Matteo, and Beliaev 2021; Rossi and Stuart 2020). According to Stuart and Rossi (2020:14), this politically important person was possibly the successor and daughter of Yax We'n Chan K'inich, the king whose name appears on the Los Sabios Mural in association with the date 749 (Saturno et al. 2017:426), as well as a number of unprovenienced ceramics (Garrison and Stuart 2004; Krempel and Matteo 2012; 2013). The publicly-manifested political power of Ix Yax We'n Chahk may have elevated the importance of other Xultun women, such as the woman who appears as a ritual assistant on the Peabody vase, which may have been painted within a decade after the dedication of the last known stelae in honor of Ix Yax We'n Chahk.

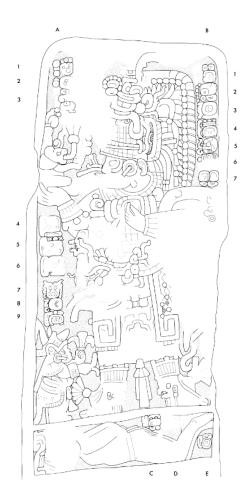


Fig. 11. Xultun Stela 25, depicting Ix Yax We'n Chahk. 761/780. Drawing by Eric von Euw (von Euw and Graham 1984:88).



For its part, Tikal during the last decades of the eighth century was experiencing a decline in political influence (Martin and Grube 2008:51). Although it was no longer threatened by Calakmul, many of its former clients were erecting new monument programs. So the emphasis on a 'lady Xultun *ajaw*' on the Peabody vase may hint at attempts by Tikal to strengthen alliances among polities through such elite women. An analogy may be drawn with information provided by K2695, which depicts the late Tikal king Yax Nuun Ahiin II in a dressing scene, accompanied by a woman named Ix Iis (see Houston 2018:69–70; Martin and Grube 2008:51). The date when this event takes place, in 794, is in line with the vessel's style, implying that this vase was painted at about the time as the Peabody vase. Moreover, the vessel had been placed in a burial of a subadult female (PNT-009; Laporte and Fialko 1995:82, fig. 70), suggesting that the tomb occupant may correspond to the principal woman depicted on the vase, Ix Iis. Dental data from the tomb occupant further indicates that she was from Peten lakes (Wright 2012:349, Tab. 1). Thus, like the pot itself, which is painted in a style distinct from Tikal ceramics of the time (Gallenkamp and Johnson 1985:141, cat. 71), this woman may have been sent from some site in the Peten lakes area to Tikal to forge an alliance through marriage.



Fig. 12. Vase excavated from female burial (PNT-009) at Tikal. Museo Nacional de Arqueología e Etnología 11.419 [K2695]. Photo by Justin Kerr.

In conclusion, although it was heavily repainted in modern times, the Peabody vase provides information about the importance of Xultun in the Maya world at the end of the Late Classic period. Depicting an enema scene taking place at Xultun, the vase was likely painted at a distant locale, somewhere in the Peten lakes-Tikal area, based on comparisons with K5453, which has been attributed to this region, through on chemical signatures. Based on a stylistic comparison with the same vase, a



date of ca. 790 can likewise be posited for it. During this time, the political clout of Tikal was on the wane, and the reference to Xultun seen on the vase could be evidence of an attempt to renew alliances between Tikal and Xultun. It is also within this context that that we may begin to understand the prominent position of the woman depicted on the vase, who is the unique titled person here, despite her role as a ritual assistant positioned behind the focal male ruler. The prominence of this 'lady Xultun ajaw' may relate to the enhanced role of women at Xultun during this time, when a prominent female ruler, Ix Yax We'n Chahk, had just been celebrated publicly through an impressive monumental art program, as well as more privately, through luxury ceramic vessel commissions. The Peabody vase provides a unique glimpse into the rapidly fragmenting political network of the central and eastern Maya lowlands, where rulers increasingly relied on pottery painting, likely exchanged as gifts between elites of different sites, as a means of retaining what limited power they still had.

Table 2. Text of Peabody vase. Photos by Matthew Looper.

32000	А	a-AL-ya	alay	here
999	В	K'AL?-la-ja-	k'ahlajich?	is dedicated?



8200	С	-ji/yi-chi	11	11
	D	u-	utz'ihbaal	its painting
	E	-tz'i-	11	11
	F	-ba-	II	11



	G	-li	п	11
08508	н	ta IXIM?-wa	ta ixi'mte'el? kakaw?	for maize-tree? cacao?
860	I	yu-UK'	yuk'ib	his/her drinking vessel
	J1	9 wa?-le-wa	balu'n ??	9 ??



J2	YAX-K'IN-ni	yaxk'in	Yaxk'in
К	2 PIK	cha' pihk	16,000 [beans?]
L1	к'ауом	k'ayo'm	singer
L2	??	??	??



	L3	ma-tz'a-ja	mahtzaj?	is enchanted?
	L4	ma	_	_
	M1	ka-yi?-ki	kayik?	our ??
(D) (S) (S) (S) (S) (S) (S) (S) (S) (S) (S	M2	u-ti-ya	uhtiiy	it happened at



	M3	BAX-WITZ-a?	baaxwitza'?	Baaxwitz [Xultun]
	N	ix	ix	lady
	0	BAX-WITZ	baaxwitz	Baaxwitz [Xultun]
500	Р	AJAW-wa	ajaw	lord

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