

Some Notes on the Iconography of Kerr No. 6994

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Kerr No. 6994 (photograph by Justin Kerr)

Kerr No. 6994, at first viewing, seems to contain an iconographic narrative that might be easily interpreted: there are two pairs of anthropomorphic beings, each separated by a tree with a bird and a bird with a serpent and a flower.

Each pair of anthropomorphic beings has on its left an aged male figure while on the right there is a young male figure. In both cases the aged anthropomorphic being has T24 MIRROR markings, indicative of his status as a god. One of the aged anthropomorphic beings has a jaguar-like ear and a necklace with possibly a spiny shell. Although very tentative, these aged male figures may be representations of a headdressless God L. In one case also the young anthropomorphic being has a T24 MIRROR marking on his body. In the middle of each pair there is some kind of offering (a vessel with some unknown contents and possibly some kind of belt or headband).

Of particular interest are the images that separate the two pairs. One of these images depicts a tree growing from an anthropomorphic possibly even skull-like head. The tree has four branches and each branch seems to end in some kind of flower. On the lowest branch one can find a bird which faces the viewer.

It might be possible to identify this particular bird species. This bird seems to have ears or horns at each side of its head. It has somewhat large round eyes and the rudimentary coloring of the feathered body suggest a dark brown color. The bird seems to have medium sized to long tail feathers. The frontal view of this bird can be compared to the side view of a similar bird on Kerr No. 0501:



Kerr No. 6994



Kerr No. 0501

Comparison of bird species

If correctly identified, the bird as depicted on Kerr No. 0501 has a dark brown body with some kind of speckled plumage, indicated by the triple black dots occurring on the feathers. The bird seems to have a white collar and a partially white chest. He has a medium sized tail with black tipped tail feathers. The eye is circled by a black ring while a large ear or horn can be found placed to the back of the eye. The hooked beak as well as the large claws clearly identify the bird as raptorial.

The large foliage or vegetal element as placed on the top of his head makes it possible to compare this bird with a specific bird as depicted in the Dresden and Madrid Codex:



Dresden 7C2



Dresden 10A1



Dresden 11A1

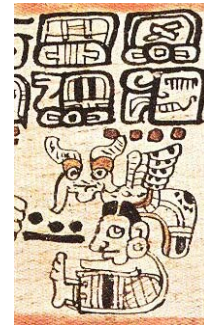
These three examples from the Dresden Codex provide an anthropomorphic version of the bird as depicted on Kerr No. 0501 and Kerr No. 6994. Only the head is still bird-like, on top of which one can find the foliage or vegetal element (on Dresden 11A1 it seems to be a sprouting maize kernel, note T504 from which the foliage seems to sprout). The explanatory texts on Dresden 7C2 and Dresden 10A1 seem to refer to this bird as **13-CHAN(-NAL) ku-yu** or *huxlajuun chan(al) kuy* “Thirteen Celestial Owl” (the foliage may be a cue to *nal*).



Dresden 16C1



Dresden 18B3



Madrid 95C2

The above three examples from the Dresden and Madrid Codex provide the bird in its natural form. In the two examples from the Dresden Codex the bird is named in the first collocation as **13-BIRD.HEAD**. The number thirteen (*huxlajuun*) could also be found in the three references illustrated earlier of the anthropomorphic version of the bird. The third example, from the Madrid Codex, illustrates the same bird, but its head is painted fronting the viewer. This particular example can be compared to the bird as depicted in the tree on Kerr No. 6994. The opening two collocations in the Madrid Codex example provide the name of the bird, **'i-ki ku-yu** or *iki[m] kuy* (in Classic Maya the phoneme or sound *-m* on occasion is underspelled). In colonial and present-day Yucatec Maya *ikim* and *(ah)kuy* mean “owl” (Barrera Vasquez et al. 1980: 265, 357; Bricker, Po’ot Yah, and Dzul de Po’ot 1998: 12).

There is a common predatory bird that might be represented in the above images. That is the Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*). Great Horned Owls occur in a variety of habitats, from dense forest, deserts, and plains to city parks. Their plumage varies regionally from pale to dark, it is generally speckled, while they also have a white collar and white patched chest that stands out. Most distinctive are the large feather horns above the ringed eyes:



a)



b)



c)

Three Views of the Great Horned Owl

a) photograph by Janice Laurencelle, b) photograph by Paul Miller,
c) photograph by Robert McCaw



Actual Distribution of the Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*)
(© <http://www.owlpages.com>)

Great Horned Owls are currently found throughout North America, from the northern treeline, into Central and South America. In general they are resident year-round; the subspecies identified in the Maya area (Mexico, Central America) has been dubbed *Bubo virginianus mayensis*. Great Horned Owls are formidable hunters; they dive from high perches and hunt for a large variety of prey, including birds (e.g. turkeys, pigeons, woodpeckers), rodents, bats, large insects, scorpions, centipedes, spiders, amphibians (e.g. frogs, toads, salamanders), young alligators, and serpents (information derived from <http://www.owlpages.com>). The bird in the tree on Kerr No. 6994 as well as on Kerr No. 0501 may well be the Great Horned Owl. The tree in which the owl sits may be a stangler fig, possibly the *Ficus cotinifolia*, H. B. et K., common in the Maya area (the tree on Kerr No. 0501 is also the *Ficus cotinifolia*). This fig tree attracts a large variety of frugivores (fruit-eating animals) and predatory animals that may serve as prey for the owl.

The following three images illustrate God L, the god with the bird headdress, and commonly identified as Lord of the Underworld:



K#0511



K#2796



K#1398

These three images illustrate God L wearing his bird headdress (Kerr No. 0511 and 2796) as well as his solitary removed bird headdress (Kerr No. 1398). Especially this last illustration of the God L headdress provides a hieroglyphic caption reading **13-CHAN-NAL** or *huxlajuun chanal*, part of the bird's name as found in the Dresden Codex, *huxlajuun chanal kuy* (the bird itself may provide the part *kuy* "owl"). These three particular examples strengthen the case that the bird in the tree on Kerr No. 6994 is indeed the Great Horned Owl, while it also may strengthen the case that the aged anthropomorphic figures with god markings on Kerr No. 6994 are representations of a headdressless God L (specifically note large jaguar-like ear and jaguar-like patch around mouth of God L on Kerr No. 2697).

Other parts of the iconography on Kerr No. 6994 need further research before a detailed description can be presented.

Taxonomy and Nomenclature

Taxonomic Serial No.	177884
Taxonomical Status	valid & reviewed
Common Name	Great Horned Owl (English) Grand-duc d'Amérique (French) Buhó cornudo (Spanish)
Kingdom	Animalia - Animals
Phylum	Chordata - Chordates
Subphylum	Vertebrata - Vertebrates
Class	Aves - Birds
Order	Strigiformes - Owls
Family	Strigidae - Typical Owls
Genus	<i>Bubo</i> - Horned Owls (Dumeril 1806)
Species	<i>virginianus</i> (J. F. Gmelin 1788)
Subspecies	<i>Bubo virginianus mayensis</i> (not verified)

(adapted from <http://www.itis.usda.gov> and <http://siit.conabio.gob.mx>)

References

- Barrera Vásquez, Alfredo, et al.
1980 *Diccionario Maya Cordemex: maya-español, español-maya*. Mérida, Yuc.: Ediciones Cordemex.
- Bricker, Victoria, Eleuterio Po'ot Yah, and Ofelia Dzul de Po'ot
1998 *A Dictionary of The Mayan Language As Spoken in Hocabá, Yucatán*. Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press.