

God K on Maya Ceramic Vessels Notes and Commentary

By Helen Alexander

Categories of God K Vessels

God K appears on many Maya ceramic vessels in various ways. For instance, he may be depicted as a full figure on the tail of a snake, known as the *och chan*, as a head wrapped in smoke scrolls, often in a pair, as a dancer or as an icon, either on the tail of a conjuring serpent or a *way* beast. In addition, his name appears in glyphic texts, most often on vessels on which he is also depicted, but sometimes his name appears in ceramic vessel texts without God K illustrations. The vessels containing images or references to God K are so numerous that I have divided them into categories to bring some order to my notes and commentaries. However, God K sometimes appears in multiple ways on the same vessel complicating any discussion by category so there is necessarily some overlap in my discussion. In the course of this study I examined 167 vessels that either show God K in full figure, as an icon, or in glyphic text. This is not an exhaustive study as there are other vessels that have icons that probably refer to God K. I have opted not to attempt to identify all possible iconic depictions of God K. Not all vessels listed in each category are discussed in detail.

In addition, on a number of vessels God K is depicted in the form of other gods, indicating perhaps, a sharing of divine attributes, or even a dynamic changing of form from one deity into another, more than a true conflation. Nonetheless, I have retained the wording of Category 8, “God K conflated with other Gods,” as the simplest expression of the concept.

The categories are:

- 1. God K on the tail of the conjuring serpent**
- 2. God K icon on the tail of the baby jaguar**
- 3. God K icon on the tail of ‘way’ beasts**
- 4. God K as dancer or in costume of sacred dancers**
- 5. Human impersonators of God K**
- 6. God K as a ruler’s scepter or staff**
- 7. God K as paired images on non-narrative vessels**
- 8. God K conflated with other Gods**
- 9. God K in glyphic texts, read *K’awil***

A study of these categories reveals the character of God K. He is the power behind conjuring, transformation and transcendence in Maya ritual practice; he is the essence of the *och chan*, the bearded dragon of *Xibalba*; he is the essence of the sacred dance that empowers the Maize God to dance out of *Xibalba*; he is the essence of human royal power that allows mankind access to the cosmos from the heavens down to earth and into *Xibalba* itself. He is also the power of the Rain God’s lightning ax that splits the earth

making the resurrection of the Maize God possible. He also dwells in temples making them holy places of emergence.

Diagnostic Characteristics of God K

Before discussing the nine categories a few points about diagnostic characteristics of God K should be noted.¹ First and most diagnostic is the forehead torch. Almost all depictions of God K have this. A few times God K is depicted with the torch emanating from the top of his head, but it usually emanates from his forehead. The second most frequently noted diagnostic is his large nose. In the codices his prominent nose is up-turned; on the ceramic vessels it is most often down-turned or only slightly up-turned. The third most frequent diagnostic is his snake foot, visible in full figure depictions. As we shall see this diagnostic is enough to suggest God K's presence on human impersonators and in confluations with other gods. Other diagnostics include a scroll eye, a forehead mirror, a hair fringe that in some cases looks flower-like, a distinctive jade flower dangling from his loincloth, a jade necklace, bracelets and anklets and a shriveled looking ear often with a single bead earring. The ear may also be depicted as a rounded off square jade bead. God K may wear cloth pulled through his pierced ear or a leaf similar to the one the Maize God wears in his ear. On the ceramic vessels, God K often has the jade bead or cloth knot and foliage element at the back of the head similar, or even identical, to that worn by the Maize God.

My notes and commentary on the vessels in the nine categories follows.

Category 1 - God K on the tail of the conjuring serpent

(Vessels K531, K719, K793, K1006, K1079, K1081, K1198, K1228, K1230, K1231, K1341, K1364, K1375, K1604, K1652, K1653, K1670, K1813, K1834, K1873, K1882, K2213, K2284, K2572, K2706, K2774, K3150, K3202, K3413, K3702, K3716, K4114, K4485, K5164, K5230, K5862, K6036, K6754, K7838, K7190, K7523, K7604, K7794)

God K is readily and securely identified on the ceramic vessels where he appears in full figure on the tail of a conjuring snake. The conjuring snake has been identified as *och chan* by Kerr.² The conjurers on the vessels may be either male or female. The narrative scenes on these vessels have often been identified as mythological showing gods as the subjects of the scenes,³ however, sometimes it is clear that a Maya lord is the conjurer depicted on the vessel. This study has reinforced the concept that for the Maya the smoky veil separating the supernatural and the natural is very thin, indeed.

A comparison between K2572 and seven other vessels depicting male conjurers illustrates the point. The male conjurer on K2572 looks like the Maize God, but he has a name tag that seems to read *k'inich ajaw*, sun-eyed lord, a common title for Maya rulers. However, the name may actually read *kinich hun ajaw* suggesting the conjurer may be the *Popol Vuh* hero, *Hunahpu*, or the mythical Maize God as hero twin. So it is reasonable to ask whether we are looking at a ruler dressed and acting out the role of *Hunahpu*, or whether we are looking into the primordial past at a mythological event. My reading of the iconography is that the scene depicts a ruler who has entered/re-created

the mythological past through ecstatic trance. On the other hand of the vessels showing a male conjurer, Vessels K1364, K1604, K2715, K3150, K4114, K7289 and K7523, give no indication that the male conjurers are gods. They maintain their human identities while participating in a mythological or trance scene of the supernatural. Each holds a woven mat tube with a conjuring serpent emerging from each end, also a common depiction of male rulers on Maya carved stone monuments. When conjuring elite males entered supernatural and also possibly mythological space, they transcended the human, normal time-space of daily existence. Further evidence of the humanity of the male conjurers is found on K2715 where the male wears the jester god diadem, establishing his royal status. Another human figure seated cross-legged at the far left of the vessel holds an offering plate apparently representing a human attendant on the royal lord as he conjures. The attendant's name tag seems to read *Yax Une Uh(or Ah) K'un*, perhaps roughly deciphered as First Son (of) Scribe, re-emphasizing the elite status of the males depicted in the narrative scene. The other vessels depicting male conjurers are nearly identical and depict the same transcendence of human time and space.

A similar argument can be made for the female conjurer on the snake lady conjuring vessels. While she looks very human, she has been identified as Moon Lady who is noted for her wantonness in Maya mythology.⁴ No decipherable name phrase for the Moon, however, has been found on any of these vessels to help establish her identity securely. Whether she is human, divine or semi-divine, God K appears in full figure on the tail of the conjuring snake on all of the snake-lady vessels (except three: K1382, K4485 and K2067), demonstrating by his presence the transcendence of human space/time in the narrative scene.

Interestingly, God K does not appear in full figure on K4485 (a snake-lady vessel) or on K2572 (a male conjurer vessel), however, the icon on the tail of the conjuring serpent on K4485 is identical to the icon on the tail of the conjuring serpent on K2572. On both vessels, the icon is a God K head with the smoke scroll emanating from the top of the head. Despite the variant detail of smoke scroll placement on the top of the head instead of the forehead, the icon is clearly a substitution for the full-figure God K who appears on the tail of the snake on all other snake lady and male conjurer vases. K2067 also shows an icon on the tail of the conjuring serpent, a foliated *ajaw*, but Kerr notes that this vessel has been so heavily over-painted that one cannot trust the details on it.⁵ Underscoring his point, the glyphs on this vessel differ markedly from the glyphs on other snake lady vessels where repetition of verbs and god names occurs repeatedly, suggesting that indeed one should not trust the over-painting on K2067. Nonetheless, on K1256, K1873, K7190 and K7523 a foliated *ajaw* does appear on the tail of a conjuring snake, clearly substituting for the full-figure God K that usually appears on the tail of the *och chan*, or conjuring snake in both snake lady and male conjuring vessel scenes. These instances establish the foliated *ajaw* icon on the tail of the *och chan* as direct substitutions for the full figure God K.

The common interpretation of God K conjuring scenes, whether on ceramic vessels, or on monumental inscriptions is that the Maya royalty participated in these rituals to manifest their ancestors and the gods⁶. It was once thought that conjuring and the accompanying

visions were induced by blood-letting. Looper has cast doubt, I think rightly, on this interpretation.⁷ Conjuring may have been done with or without the aid of psychoactive substances. For example, in *Maya Cosmos*⁸ Parker has made a case for trance dancing (without the aid of psychoactive substances) as a means of accessing the supernatural. The ancient Maya had ready access to a number of psychoactive substances, but whether they actually used them for conjuring is harder to establish. As we shall see, the evidence is tantalizing, but inconclusive.

The first and most compelling evidence is the appearance of trance-like dancing shown in conjunction with jars and drinking vessels. K114, and K1375 are two good examples of this juxtaposition. On K114 a lord dressed in a God K snake costume is dancing before a temple in which a lord and lady are seated cross-legged, drinking. The lady holds a cup up to her mouth and the lord is being served a cup by another lord seated cross-legged, apparently seated just outside the door of the temple. The dancing figure is especially wonderful as it combines elements of the *och chan*, the Maize God and God K. The head emerging from the *och chan*/God K dance costume is that of the Maize God. It even bears the Maize God flower, a usual part of the Maize God diadem (See also Categories 5 and 8.) Thus, the dancer impersonates three supernaturals at once, indicating the importance of the mythological connections among them.

On a Chama vessel, K1219, the trio is shown again. Although the Maize God sits sedately on a snake head throne wearing an open-jawed *och chan* behind his head in a position evoking the open maw emergence theme, and God K sits cross-legged in front of the Maize God, the swirling smoke and swaying feathers emanating from the smoke scrolls animate the scene as if the God K were dancing. (However, this vessel should be viewed cautiously as it is in an unnaturally 'perfect' state of preservation.)⁹

Returning to the K114 vessel, the lady in the temple sits with her back resting on a shell and the figure behind the dancer has shells attached to his body. The lord and lady would appear to have journeyed to Xibalba through the agency of the drink. The temple roof-comb features a Sun God head emerging from an *och chan* maw, a sky-band and a Venus glyph so we also know that this Xibalba scene was connected to an astronomical event, we just do not know the specifics of the astronomy being invoked. My guess would be Venus either at heliacal rise or maximum elongation, possibly at the time of new moon (the lady in the dark of the temple) or during a lunar eclipse.¹⁰

On K1375 a Maya lord dances before a large vessel as an *och chan* belches forth the old god. The dancing lord is in a strange falling down dance position implying at the very least inebriation. The vision before him would make it seem likely that he may be dancing in a drug induced trance and in so doing has conjured up the *och chan* and the old god. Although somewhat unclear, the glyph collocation on the vessel may be *pas*, 'to dawn, or open.' (Macri, MZ2)¹¹ If the reading is correct, perhaps the drink in the vessel opens the maw of the *och chan*, providing access to the supernatural world of gods and deified ancestors.

An additional clue to the contents of the vessel may be alluded to in the 7 *Etz'nab* day name of the three-glyph text. See the discussion below of Schultes, Hoffman and Raitsch's work on the use of native psychoactive plants.

On K1364 the old god emerging from the maw of the *och chan* offers the male conjurer a cup. A full-figure God K dances on the tail of the conjuring serpent. Again the conjuring of a god is associated with drink.

Drinking is not the only method of ingesting psychoactive substances. A number of Maya vessels show Maya lords and ladies not only drinking, but also smoking, and taking enemas. At several Maya Long Workshops at the University of Texas in Austin presenters have mentioned that ingesting psychoactive drugs anally produces a more powerful and instantaneous reaction than drugs taken orally.

A quick summary of the vessels listed in Kerr's database¹² showing clysters (and also sometimes smoking) are summarized below:

- K1381 – Clyster in large olla, Maya lord impersonating god holds cup, ecstatic dance-acrobat figure, dog with possible God K icon on tail
- K1973 – Jaguar holding clyster, God K head on *K'awak*, or *Witz* Monster head
- K3395 – Dancing jaguar holding clyster, Maya lord holds jaguar scepter with God K icon on the tail (For a more complete discussion of God K icons see Category 3.)
- K4605 – Vomiting jaguar appears before Maya lord wearing a hat with a God K torch icon on the forehead
- K7152 – Dancing god smokes and wears *och chan* headdress with God K icon, dancing god holds clyster, cup, carries decapitated head in olla on back-rack
- K7604 – Hero twin, *Xbalanque*, holds cup and clyster, has God K head on tail of his jaguar kilt
- K8763 – Dancing *Chak* has God K snake markings on legs; Maya lord holds cup above large olla with smoke scrolls emanating from it
- K8798 – Two Maya lords seated cross-legged, one holds clyster, the other holds cup, both have God K torch icons attached to shells from which they appear to have emerged

As already mentioned the Maya had a number of psychoactive substances available to them. Summarized below are descriptions and suggested evidence for the use of four native psychoactive plants likely to have been used by the Maya. (I have not included mushrooms or peyote, although I may wish to include them at a later date. Those who are more knowledgeable about trade routes and trade goods of the Maya may wish to add others.)

Native tobacco- *Nicotiana tabacum*- was readily accessible to the ancient Maya. It is very strong and can induce hallucinations. The Maya depicted God L smoking tobacco on their stone monuments, most famously perhaps, at Palenque on the doorjamb of the Temple of the Cross. We have already noted the prominence of an old god, either God L or God N, in the God K-snake lady ceramic vessels. Although the old god is not shown smoking on these vessels, the god emerging from the *och chan*'s open jaws does have a

God K like smoking torch in his forehead on several (K719, K1198, K3202, K3716, K6754). The snake lady wears a skirt with a distinctive pattern (See K1198 and K5164 for particularly clear examples of this pattern.) that resembles the illustration of a tobacco leaf in Plants of the Gods.¹³ (Interestingly, this pattern could also be a cacao tree leaf.) If her skirt really is meant to represent a tobacco leaf, the pattern in her skirt may be meant to suggest that tobacco was used in conjuring rites as a psychoactive agent.

Morning glory seeds-*Ipomoea violacea* or *Corymbosa turbina*-were also readily available to the ancient Maya, although neither the flower nor plant has been specifically identified on any of the ceramic vessels. The seeds of *Ipomoea violacea* are still used in Zapotec villages today. Schultes, et.al. write, "The dose is frequently seven or a multiple of seven; at other times, the familiar thirteen is the dose."¹⁴ The seeds are ground up and mixed with water, then the potion is drunk. The repetition of the numbers seven and thirteen in the calendar round dates of the conjuring vessels is noteworthy in this connection. Since so many of the calendar round coefficients are impossible *k'in* and *haab* month combinations, it would seem probable that they were meant to convey some meaning now lost to us. Simon Martin has suggested that they may not be meant to be real dates, but mythological references to an indefinite time in the past.¹⁵

Although I admit that it may not be possible to know what this significance is, I would like to propose that the frequency of the numbers seven and thirteen are oblique references to the dosage of psychoactive seeds ingested for the conjuring ritual. The persistence of the number 13 as a 'magic' number to this day among the Maya gives us reason to keep the suggestion about the unreal coefficients in mind. Additional evidence may be found, for example, in the work of Breedlove and Laughlin who comment throughout their book on current Zinacantecan use of native plants that the number 13 is still used in a variety of curative rituals. For instance, 13 chilies, or 13 pine needles steeped in water are used as an antidote for spider bite. For swelling 13 splinters of a Pom tree can be brewed with gunpowder and drunk for breakfast. Also, four sets of thirteen corn kernels (52-a count of days familiar from the Dresden Codex) are used in a water mixture for divination.¹⁶

However, modern experimentation with Morning Glory seeds has shown that 7 or 13, or even 39 (3x13) or 52 (4x13) Morning Glory seeds are not enough to produce an ecstatic, hallucinatory state.¹⁷ Modern experimentation has also shown that the hallucinatory affect can be enhanced by drinking alcohol with the ground Morning Glory seeds. If the Maya used alcohol or other psychoactive substances to make a 'cocktail' of hallucinatory agents to enhance potency, we as yet have no evidence of it as far as I know. On several ceramic vessels with God K on them, drinking scenes with jars, cups and clysters appear. Two examples in which God K appear unambiguously are K1973 and K5862. On a number of others, God K appears as an icon, or as a head of ambiguous interpretation. Whether the hallucinatory agent was ever Morning Glory seeds we do not know. What we do know is that they are indigenous and widely available in the Maya region.

The Badianus Manuscript, a 16th century Aztec book of herbal medicine, describes many potions with numerous ingredients that the Aztec used for illnesses.¹⁸ Comments on

Maya counterparts, all of which are simpler, mostly consisting of only one or two ingredients, are included in the text. This may be indirect evidence that multi-ingredient hallucinatory potions were used by pre-conquest native populations, but one has to proceed with caution when considering post-conquest evidence in such herbals produced in Spanish ecclesiastical settings. For instance, hallucinogenic properties of plants are ignored in the herbal. So for the moment one must add this cautionary note and hope for further evidence in the future.

Datura-Datura metel-is another native plant that the ancient Maya would have had ready access to. Of this plant in the New World, Schultes, et.al. write, "In the New World, the Mexicans call *Datura* "Toloache", a modern version of the ancient Aztec *Toloatzin* . . . It was employed not only to induce visual hallucinations but also for a great variety of medicinal uses, especially when applied to the body to relieve rheumatic pains and to reduce swellings."¹⁹ He goes on to say that the Yaqui in Mexico still use it to ease childbirth pains in women. The seeds of this plant were ground up and mixed with water, then drunk. Breedlove and Laughlin write that the Zinacantecans call this plant, *Makom Uch*, or Opossum *Makom*.²⁰ The opossum is associated with the dark hours just before dawn and the five unlucky days of *Wayeb* before the beginning of the new *tun*.²¹ If the name of this plant is a holdover from earlier times, it would seem probable that any use of the seeds of this plant for hallucinogenic affect in sacred ritual may have been conducted in the pre-dawn hours or in the five days before a new *tun* in Maya times.

Although no depiction of *Datura* has been securely identified on Maya ceramic vessels. I would suggest K5366 might have a representation of *datura* seed pods in the flower scrolls above and below the head of the *och chan*/God K paired heads, but do not consider the identification definite. Botanical illustrations show *datura* flowers as large, pendant, tubular blooms from white to yellow in color. The tubular flowers shown on K2995 and K5366 resemble them.

Waterlily-Nymphaea Ampla-is another native plant the Maya would have had ready access to. In addition, of course, waterlilies are prominent plants in the iconography of the Maya, often interpreted as indicative of death and the gods of the underworld, as well as references to the afterlife. Several ceramic vessels, K3151, K4682, K2295, K2799, K5366, and K7146, link God K with waterlilies. On a number of others, the Waterlily Monster has up-scrolled eyes like God K (K4957, K5452, K5541, K5628, K6616, K7979, K8252) and on others Kawak markings on the forehead suggest a connection with God K (K8278, K8621, K8624). (See the discussion of the Kawak Monster and God K under Category 2.) Furthermore on K8278, K8621 and K8624, the Waterlily Monster wears a God K like torch from which water lily buds, flowers and seedpods sprout.

On K4682, a pair of full figure God Ks sit on jaguar thrones. They appear to have large water lily seed pods in their headdresses. They each hold a shallow bowl that Kerr calls a 'cache vessel.'²²

On K2799 a water lily emerges from the loincloth belt of the seated Maize God and extends towards a dynamic dancing full-figure God K, suggesting a possible connection between God K's dance and the hallucinogenic water lily. As Schultes, et.al. write, "There exist numerous interesting parallels between the ritualistic (shamanic) significance of *Nymphaea* in the Old and the New Worlds, suggesting that *Nymphaea* may have been used as a narcotic, possibly a hallucinogen."²³ Besides drying and smoking the buds, Schultes notes that the roots may be eaten raw or cooked and the buds made into a tea. According to him, the psychoactive agents are apomorphine, nuciferine and nornuciferine.²⁴

On the other hand, Mike McBride, a pharmacist and amateur Mayanist, has told me that he doubts the hallucinatory effectiveness of water lily buds, dried and smoked as Schultes et.al. suggest.²⁵ So for water lilies also, we must add a cautionary note for interpreting the depictions of waterlilies in sacred ritual contexts as evidence for their use as psychoactive agents.

While it can be said that the Maya certainly had access to plants with psychoactive properties, identifying specific plants for specific rituals shown on Maya ceramic vessels remains problematic.

Category 2 - God K icon on the tail of the baby jaguar

(K521-(glyph), K1003-(tail touching glyph), K1152-(possible glyph), K1200, K1370-(Kawak lip), K1644-(identical scene), K1645, K1815-(tail icon, Kawak lip, poss. Glyph), K1973-(Kawak lip), K2208-(glyph), K2213-(snake tail icon), K4011-(Kawak lip), K4013-(Kawak lip), K4056, K4384, K4385-(Kawak lip, tail icon), K8680-(tail icon, possible glyph)

The motif of the sacrifice of the baby jaguar, which isn't necessarily either a sacrifice or a baby jaguar, occurs on seventeen vessels. The baby jaguar vessels and those depicting male and female conjurers, despite their disparate narrative scenes, share important similarities in their texts. Not only are many of the calendar rounds similar in carrying 7 or 13 coefficients, most of the possible *haab* dates for baby jaguar vessels occur from October through March in the ninth baktun. This is also the case on most of the conjuring vessels on which the calendar rounds are clearly legible. The seasonal similarities may have had astronomical significance not explored here because the topic is complex and deserves more attention than is possible in this paper. In addition, the two sets of vessels share the same verbs for the most part: *yal*, read by Simon Martin as 'throw, or thrown' (K2213, K4011, K4056, K8680).²⁶ The verb is followed by *k'awil* or another name, presumably a god, on two other vessels possible *siyah* verbs, first recognized, but not read as *siyah*, by Proskouriakoff as 'birth, or born'²⁷ (K1645, K1645), and two *tz'akah* verbs (K2208 and K1370), read by Schele as 'to conjure.'²⁸ (See Category 9 for more information.)

Furthermore the god titles that follow the verbs are parallel and in cases identical to conjuring scene vessels. The '7 deer horn vase' title common on the conjuring vessels,

for example, appears on a number of the baby jaguar vessels (K521, K1152, K1645, K2213, K4011, K4013, K4056).

God K is not seen in full-figure on any of the baby jaguar vessels, but appears either as a tail icon, or as a head on the upper lip of the *Kawak* (or *Witz*) Monster. The God K icon on the tail of the baby jaguar, for example, appears on a number of the vessels (K1200, K1815, K2213, K4011, K4385, K8680). In the absence of the icon on the tail of the baby jaguar its tail may touch or be close to the *K'awil* glyph in adjacent text (K1003, K4011.) On nine of the baby jaguar vessels God K's head appears on the snout of the *Kawak* Monster's supine head on which in turn the baby jaguar rests or descends (BOD vessels K1003, K1815, K521, K1370, K1644, K1768, BOD26, K1152, K4011, K4013, K4385). The *Kawak* Monster of mountains and caves is often interpreted as the entrance to the underworld suggesting a chthonic element to God K.²⁹ In a couple of depictions of the *Kawak* Monster head on the ceramic vessels, the snake and God K become merged with the stone suggesting a possible connection with the snake throne of creation. (See the discussion below for Category 8.)

Unlike a number of the conjuring scene vessels, the *haab* dates on most of the baby jaguar vessels are clearly *Kayab*. The month *Kayab* appears on ten of the baby jaguar vessels (K521, K1003, K1370, K1644, K1815, K2208, K2213, K4011, K4013?, K8680) and the coefficient seven is repeated numerous times both in the day and in the month. The repetition of *Kayab* in the Calendar Round suggests that this month was an important one for the ritual depicted on these vases. *Kayab* fell in the winter-time during baktun nine, the most probable *baktun* when these vessels were produced.³⁰ The obvious intentionality of the repetition of *Kayab* on the baby jaguar vessels combined with textual similarities with the conjuring vessels raises the possibility that the *haab* dates on the two vessels types were meant to be the same, but for some reason have become garbled. Perhaps because the snake-lady vessels are so spectacular there was a greater sense of urgency in trying to re-paint them to restore them for re-sale value thus destroying important epigraphic evidence. There is also the possibility that the Maya had reasons of their own for the dates as they appear on the snake lady vessels. I mention these issues in passing as they are important issues that deserve in depth treatment beyond the scope of this paper.

The iconographic evidence shows that God K is an important power in the action of the rituals seen on the 'baby jaguar' vessels. The relationship among the deities and God K's role in the ritual is not as clear. What is evident from the similarities in the texts between the snake lady vessels and those of the 'baby jaguar' vessels is that conjuring and the access to the realm of the supernatural and the underworld provided through conjuring are the subjects of both vessel types.

I would be reluctant to draw the conclusion that these vessels represent a narrative sequence, that is, the birth of the baby jaguar on the snake lady vessels followed by the 'sacrifice' of the baby jaguar on the baby jaguar vessels. The lack of congruence in the Calendar Round dating of the two vessel types and the lack of knowledge about these

mythological beliefs lead me to conclude that one should not link these two vessel types in more than a typological sense at this time.

Category 3 - God K icon on the tail of 'way' beasts

K1181, K1228, K1230, K1231, K1253, K1652, K3242, K3392, K3459, K3470, K3812, K4416, K5632)

K1652 and K2572 are key to understanding that the icons on the tails of 'way' beasts are, indeed, God K. The icons on the tails of the conjuring serpents on both vessels are clearly identical and appear where full-figure God Ks appear in other conjuring scenes. These God K head icons can also appear on conjuring serpents and other beasts' tails as little foliated bones or *ajaws*. The foliated bones or *ajaws* are commonly interpreted as flowers, but it is clear in the context of this study that the foliated icons on K1256, K1834, K1873, K2284, K2572, K2715 and K7190 substitute for the full-figure God Ks on the Snake Lady and male conjuring vessels. Additional evidence is found on K1253 where the foliated *ajaw* icon on the tail of a *way* beast touches the *K'awil* glyph just above it. Also, on K1003, the tail of the baby jaguar touches the *K'awil* glyph in the text above it.

As mentioned, the foliated *ajaw* and little bone icons have been interpreted as flowers. While I would agree that they represent flowers, I believe there is no such thing as 'just a flower' in Maya iconography. Flowers were correctly understood by the Maya as vital to regeneration. As such they were used iconographically to represent the concept in the supernatural realm. God K's torch is not only smoke it is vegetation. Any doubt about this connection can be put to rest by the graffiti on the floor of the Temple of Inscriptions at Palenque where God K is shown sprouting a beautiful pair of water lily buds from his head.³¹ As already suggested, God K may have been the divine embodiment of the transformative power of psychoactive plants depicted as full-figure and iconic God Ks on conjuring serpents that enabled humans to access the gods and ancestors. The attribute of transformative power shown on these vessels, whether it lay in psychoactive plants or not, is definitely an attribute of God K. This attribute may possibly have been shared by other gods seen wearing the same icons, such as the Maize God.

The *way* beasts, especially the jaguar, may have the God K conjuring snake wrapped around their necks, reminiscent of the snake lady entwined in the coils of the conjuring snake (K1230, K1652, K1653, K5632). On many of these a God K icon appears on the tail of the snake or the animal *way* wearing the snake, indicating that the God K transformative power is being invoked.

Another note of caution should probably be added here. Foliated *ajaws* on tails of snakes, jaguars and other animals probably refer to God K's transformative power. Foliated *ajaws* on other parts of humans, deities or animals may refer to God K's power, but also may indicate the depicted deity has transformative power similar to God K's, but in his own right. In other words, transformative power may be accessed by invoking deities other than God K. When God K-like torches appear in other gods' foreheads the interpretation becomes more difficult. Generally I have opted to call these depictions

evidence of conflation with God K, although I recognize that this is not the only possible interpretation.

The text of K5164 (See below under Category 9) makes it clear that conjuring was associated with bringing forth *wayob* as well as gods and ancestors. Schele has described well how Maya participants in sacred ritual either become transformed into their animal *wayob* or have them appear before them often in wild dancing postures³² such as those seen on K791 and K3413.

Category 4 - God K as dancer or in costume of sacred dancers
(K114, K517, K702, K1507, K1837, K2799, K4120, K4619)

The association of God K with sacred dance reinforces his role as a key player in transformation and transcendence rituals of the Maya. He is also associated with the Maize God in ritual dance.

K114 shows a human impersonator dancing as God K, while at the same time transcending his single role and being transformed with two other supernaturals. (See discussion above.)

On the extraordinary vessel, K702, the Maize God is shown emerging as a fully clothed dancer from the snake foot of a dancing God K. God K not only has the familiar smoking torch in his forehead, he holds a smoking torch in his hand as does God L seated cross-legged behind him fully costumed in his jaguar cape and large owl-feathered hat. The emergence of the Maize God from God K's foot would seem to suggest that God K has an important role in the resurrection of the Maize God and his subsequent dance.

On another vessel (K1219), a fabulously costumed God K sits cross-legged in front of a Maize God seated on a snake-head throne, reminiscent of the snake throne of creation.

K1507 shows God K dancing in front of two intertwined vertical snakes. God K has his diagnostic forehead torch and snake foot. He has feathers attached to his arms, making him appear to have wings. The vessel is dark and carved and it is difficult to make out all of the features.

K2799 is the most dramatic of the dancing God Ks. Vegetation and smoke scrolls fill almost every space on the vessel. God K dances before God E, the Maize God, or a ruler dressed as the Maize God. God K holds a vegetation scroll torch holding the head of the Maize God wearing the headdress of a scribe. This vessel reinforces the connection between God K and God E. The water lily iconography has been noted above.

On K4120 a human impersonator with a God K mask dances before a lord. He wears a God K mask. His face can be seen below the mask. (Also see description in Category 5 below.)

The *och chan*, and/or an icon of God K, appears in the headdress and back-racks of many of the so-called Holmul Dancers. These iconographic elements are somewhat blurred either with erosion or over-painting, but Kerr has identified a number of the back-rack elements as *och chan*, and the appearance of a clear God K head on K517.³³ Additional vessels on which these elements have been identified are K1837 and K4619. Schele has identified the Holmul Dancers as Maize God impersonators.³⁴ Transcending death is a theme of the dance and the *och chan*, God K and various other animals and deities are shown in the back-rack of the Maize God, presumably because they are of critical importance to the resurrection dance of the Maize God. On K1560 the Maize God is shown defeating the gods of *Xibalba* costumed as a dancer, emphasizing his role in transcending death.

God K and his role in dance is consistent with his role in conjuring, that is, as a transformative power apparently aiding in the transcendence over death.

Category 5 - Human impersonators of God K

(K114, K796, K1507, K3367, K4120, K4901, K6069, K8763)

Human impersonators of God K are not unique to Maya ceramics as Taube has demonstrated.³⁷ Maya lords did impersonate God K and other gods as well.

Most of the vessels on which humans seem to impersonate God K are ambiguous, that is, it is difficult to tell whether the vessel actually depicts gods or is depicting human impersonators. One of the clearer, less ambiguous examples of human impersonators of God K appears on K114. A dancing lord dressed in a God K costume dances in front of a temple in which a lord and lady sit drinking from cups apparently filled from larger vessels sitting on the floor in front of them. He can be identified as an impersonator by his normal human feet (God K has a snake foot) that emerge from the bottom of his snake marked leggings. An attendant lord seated cross-legged outside the door of an elaborately decorated temple façade, hands a cup over the top of a large jar to another lord seated cross-legged in the doorway of the temple. Seated behind the lord is a lady with her own large jar. She is drinking from a cup she holds in her hand. The largest figure on the vessel is the dancer impersonating God K. He rivets the attention of the viewer, emphasizing the role of God K in the ritual drinking and transformation of the dancer into the *och chan*-God K-Maize God composite deity. As discussed above, the combination of these three supernaturals in one image reinforces the mythic connection between them.

K796 depicts other human impersonators of God K. A warrior stands at attention in front of a building, either a palace or a temple, and two bird-costumed lords present themselves before a seated lord and lady. The lord has a God K mask and headdress, but has a royal jaguar kilt, no god markings, no snake foot and no jewelry. The lady behind him is apparently impersonating the Moon goddess and holds a rabbit with an eccentric flint either emanating from his mouth or being held in front of him. The presence of the lady and the rabbit suggest an astronomical significance to the depicted ritual, possibly a lunar eclipse as on lintels 38 and 40 at Yaxchilan. (See discussion below, Category 9.)

K1507 is an engraved vessel that depicts what may be gods, or human beings impersonating gods. The God K figure, in addition to the standard diagnostic elements, has feathers attached to his arms, a motif repeated on several other vessels. The God K figure stands before two upright entwined snakes. The entwined snakes may represent the Milky Way and/or the Ecliptic. In any case, the association of God K and a serpent/serpents continues on this vessel.

Two God Ks or human impersonators appear on K6069 seated cross-legged in rounded off square cartouches placed in two temple doorways. The cartouches have snake markings and bone markings at the corners, indicative of blood and/or water. The jewelry is more typical of that worn by lords, but this may not be definitive. The seated figures of God K have one leg ending in a snake foot, indicating that the figures may be depictions of God K instead of human impersonators. On the other hand, the snake feet are the only indications of divinity. All of the other characteristics of the figures, especially the heads, are fully human, not usual in depictions of God K.

K3367 depicts a pair of lords seated on royal thrones wearing *Itzamna* headdresses. One of the figures has a God K snake foot. Given that this figure, like the other one on the vessel, has a very human looking face, these are probably depictions of God K impersonators. (Also see God K Conflations with other Gods below.)

K4901 shows a ruler seated cross-legged in a temple wearing a headdress that appears to be either a smoke scroll or a flower. The ruler is impersonating or wearing the emblem of either God K or God D.

Vessels K114 and K4120 depict God K impersonators as dancers. (See discussion in Category 4 above.)

This group of vessels underscores the importance of understanding how very thin the line between human and supernatural could be during ritual ceremonies. As Schele noted years ago, a Maya lord impersonating a god, becomes transformed through the ritual ceremony into the divine being, thus transcending his natural being.³⁶

Category 6 - God K as a ruler's scepter or staff (K1979, K5009, K6560, K8497)

There are only a few ceramic vessels that show a ruler with a God K scepter. K1979 is a particularly clear example. On this vessel a ruler is seated cross-legged on a serpent sky-band throne, holding a God K scepter in his right hand. The serpent-sky connection is reinforced by the inclusion of the serpent sky-band throne on this vessel.

K5009 has a unique depiction of God K holding a God K scepter in his outstretched hand offering it to a ruler seated cross-legged on a saurian monster headed throne, possibly a head-on view of the celestial serpent depicted in full profile on K1979.

On K6560 a lord seated cross-legged on a throne holds a scepter whose details are not clear, but it is likely that the scepter is of God K. He faces a full-figure God K as on K1979.

The complex vessel K8497 has a God figure standing on a stepped dais composed of sky-bands, holding a long staff in his left hand and what appears to be a God K scepter in his right hand. At the top register of the narrative scene an overhanging roof-line also has a sky-band. The god figure holding the staff and God K scepter also has a Venus, or star sign in his water lily headdress.

The invocation of God K's power through the God K scepter is a well-documented iconographic theme from classic Maya monumental inscriptions. The iconographic contexts of the ceramic vessels clarifies and expands our understanding of the significance of wielding the God K scepter to conjure gods and ancestors and participate in ecstatic trance dancing during which one is transformed into deities and demi-god *wayob* connecting the ruler and his people with the cosmos, a concept explained by Schele, Freidel and Parker in Maya Cosmos.³⁷

Category 7 - God K as paired images on non-narrative vessels

(K1213, K1348, K2295, K2797, K2970, K3025, K3091, K3151, K3248, K3367, K3416, K3500, K3827, K4020, K4354, K4603, K4682, K4926, K4973, K4975, K5053, K5071, K5126, K5363, K5366, K5794, K6069, K6523, K3025-heads only, no door jambs, K3248-heads only, K4926-heads only, K5794-torsos only, K5071-heads only)

Many of the paired heads and torsos of God K appear in smoke scrolls on the vessels with no narrative context at all. A number of the vessels, however, show God K seated either in full figure or in torso view within doorways, suggesting the theme of temple-in-dwelling (K1213, K1348, K2295?, K2797, K3025, K3367, K3500, K3827, K4020, K4602, K4603, K4973, K3975, K5053, K5366, K6069, K6523, K6672, K6948K8730b, K8730d, and K8730e). One vessel, K3827 does show a narrative scene in a temple or palace. A lord has brought an offering in a covered ceramic vessel (compare K7455) to *Itzamna* who sits cross-legged, presumably on a throne that has a jaguar skin covered back rest decorated with a God K head. This vessel suggests what will be discussed in the next section: an association between God K and other specific gods, so close that in cases they become conflated.

Many of the smoke scrolls within which God K sits are specifically marked as vegetal. This may be a significant clue about the method of God K conjuring rituals or simply a recognition that most fire is made from wood, that is, vegetally based, although the usual interpretation of God K as the embodiment of lightning should be kept in mind. Two immediate connections from nature come to mind. Lightning striking a tree causes it to smoke or burn. Second, lightning fixes the nitrogen in the air into a nitrate that combines with rain to form a natural fertilizer, nourishing in this case, maize. On Vessel K3151 flowers decorate the head of God K, making the flower association absolutely clear. The somewhat ambiguous vessels K2295 and 5366 also show floral decoration. On K2295 God C sits in the flower blossoms. One is reminded of the God C appearing

prominently in the ears of the *och chan* on the Snake Lady vessels. Since the *och chan* is the *way* of God K, the close association of God K and God C helps to identify, at least tentatively, the heads on K2295 as God K heads. Since K5366 is nearly identical to K2295 with the exception of the God C heads, the inference is clear that these vessels both depict God K heads in their most vegetal incarnation. God K, usually associated with lightning, a non-vegetally based fire, is marked on these vessels as the power of a fire that is vegetal, either associated with lightning, or not. The fire on these vessels as discussed above may be related to the burning of psychoactive plants, either tobacco, or perhaps water lily buds.

Category 8 - God K conflated with other Gods

(K521-Chak, K719-old god, K1003-Kawak monster, K1006-old god, K1152-Kawak, K1198-old god, K1370-Kawak, K1768-Kawak, K1815-Kawak, K2208-Chak, K2213-Chak, K2295 & K5366-Waterlily God, K2772-Chak, K3201-Kawak, K3202-old god, K3716-old god, K4011-Kawak, K5126-Maize God, K5862-old god, K6754-old god, K8333-Kawak, K8763-Chak, K8786-Maize God)

In addition to the confluations of God K and various deities already noted in the discussion of Category 3, one of the clearest examples of the conflation of God K with other gods is K2772. A clearly depicted *Chak*, God B, appears on the vessel wielding his axe having broken through the roof of a temple where three ladies sit on a throne facing two kneeling young gods who may represent the hero twins. The *Chak* has a snake foot that coils around the supporting jambs of the temple and over half of the roof of the building. The snake's head is the open-jawed conjuring serpent from which emanates an old god who reaches forward to the jambs of the temple in a gesture identical to the one used to reach for the beautiful lady on the Snake Lady vessels. The *Chak*'s axe is interesting in that it is a torch like the one often seen in God K's forehead mirror. Here it may represent lightning.

God K is again shown conflated with Chak on K8763 on which *Chak* is shown in ecstatic trance dance. His arms, legs and torso have God K snake markings indicating that the two gods have merged in this dance.

A few words about *Chak*'s axe are in order. It may be depicted as God K's torch, as a mirror (obsidian?) or as a *kawak* stone. The torch, the mirror and the *kawak* stone are all associated with God K reinforcing the closeness of the connection between *Chak* and God K. In addition, several vessels show *Chak* with snake leg markings (K521, K2213, K4013, K8680, K8763) further indications of their connection.

God K can substitute for the old god (either God L or God N) in the mouth of the conjuring serpent (K1341, K1604, K1834, K2284-scroll out of mouth, K3150, K3413-scroll out of mouth, K6036, K7190-scroll out of mouth). Most of these are full figures, or busts of God K and are unambiguously God K. On three of the vessels, however, K2284, K3413 and K7190 only a scroll emerges from the mouth of the conjuring serpent making the identification of God K less certain, but a possibility. While the substitution of God K for the old god in the mouth of the conjuring serpent does not conclusively

prove a conflation with the old god, it suggests a close association, perhaps in their shared pivotal importance to conjuring rituals. Also the connection between the old god and God K can be seen on vessels K719, K1006, K1198, K3202, K3716 K5862 and K6754 where the old god is depicted with God K's torch in his forehead. The double connection of God K substituting for the old god and the old god wearing God K's torch in his forehead reinforces the close connection between the two.

On two vessels God K and the Maize God appear to be conflated (K5126, K8714). On these similar vessels a pair of gods are seated cross-legged in doorways of a temple. On both the Maize God wears God K's forehead torch flare.

The other supernatural creature with whom God K is closely connected is the *Kawak* monster. God K appears as the personified upper lip of the *Kawak* Monster on K521, K1003, K1152, K1370, K1768, K1815, K3201, K4011, K4013, K4385, K4546 and K8333. On several of these vessels God K appears again either on the tail of the conjuring serpent or in the text. All of these God K depictions on the upper lip of the *Kawak* Monster, except K8333, are on vessels depicting the sacrifice of the baby jaguar. On the majority of these vessels the God K head on the upper lip is accompanied by snake markings and on K1003 the whole snake is shown indicating that the *Kawak* monster altar may be in fact the cosmic snake throne of creation. The close connection of God K with images of water lilies, jaguars and the dancing Maize God is perhaps best explained by the juxtaposition of the three throne stones of creation on Stela C at Quirigua. See Matthew Looper's cogent discussion in Lightning Warrior.³⁸

Category 9 - God K in glyphic texts, read *K'awil*

(K521, K1003, K1253, K1384, K1649, K1650, K1652, K1815, K2208, K2572, K2715, K3150 and BOD 121-130, plus K2094, K5863 and K6751)

God K, or *K'awil*, appears as part of a verbal phrase, usually '*ch'am k'awil*' as on K2572, or as the object of a verb as on K3150. One could object that in the verbal phrase '*ch'am K'awil*' *K'awil* is actually the object of the verb, *ch'am*. While grammatically this may be the case, I believe *K'awil* is part of the active verb just as the written hieroglyph for the verb suggests in which the smoking *K'awil* mirror sits in the hand. One might paraphrase it something like 'grasping, *k'awiling*'. In the act of grasping *K'awil*, such as a scepter, the lord is not only acting like *K'awil*, he is becoming *K'awil*. The whole sense of the phrase is active. *K'awil* is not a passive receiver of the action. In addition, the glyph for *K'awil* appears in conjuring scenes and the sacrifice of the baby jaguar.³⁹

The dynastic sequence vases (BOD 121-130, plus K2094, K5863 and K6751) use the '*ch'am k'awil*' verbal phrase for the accession phrase. The parallel text on the dynastic sequence vases to those of conjuring scenes may suggest that conjuring in ceremonies such as those depicted on the ceramic vessels may have been a part of accession sacred ritual. For a more complete analysis of the dynastic sequence vases see Martin's article in The Maya Vase Book, Vol. V.⁴⁰

Interestingly, on K521 and K1003, *K'awil* is the object of the verb, *yal*, meaning to throw. This is a bit puzzling. Perhaps the *K'awil* scepter was thrown at some point in the accession ceremony, or perhaps the verb is a metaphor for another action that we do not understand. On two ceramic vessels the vase title follows the *yal* verb (K2213 and K1152). Was a vessel used to pour out an offering or libation then thrown and broken? Since the vase glyph collocation has been considered a title, it would seem unlikely that it depicts a literal vase. Also, as more recent epigraphic research has shown, it is more likely that the collocation is phonetic and its elements spell a word unrelated to its pictorial appearance.

On seven of the snake lady vessels (K1813, K1081, K1198, K3702, K3150, K5164 and K6754) the verb following the Calendar Round is *siyah*, meaning 'born' or 'to appear.' '*Siyah*' is followed most often by the 'seven deer horn vase' title (K3201, K1645, K5164, K1198, K5230) although it also can be followed by a compound glyph that is not very legible. Its main components seem to be T501 'ha,' 'ba' or 'ma' and T528, 'ku'. On K2213 the *yal* verb is followed by this compound glyph. It may be an optional part of the vase title since it can appear next to it, or part of a compound title of *Chak* and/or *K'awil*. It is hard to determine if the glyphs following the main verb are meant as a string of separate deity titles or as a compound title of one deity. For example, on K2208 *K'awil*'s name glyph appears first after the verb, then the vase title, then *Chak* and yet another title that also keeps reappearing, especially on the 'baby jaguar' ceramic vessels. These elements appear over and over again on the conjuring and baby jaguar vessels, but the order varies. The variance does not seem to be correlated with the narrative scenes shown.

On K1081, a snake lady/God K vessel, two mummy bundles are seated on top of sacred bundles that are the same shape as the bundles held by the royal ladies on the Yaxchilan lintels 5, 7 and 32. These bundles were used in sacred conjuring rituals. Although we do not know for sure what was in any given depicted bundle, from the context of excavated caches and the lintel iconography we can make some educated guesses—eccentric flints, god K scepters, ancestors' bones, perhaps strung together hand and wrist bones as shown on some ceramic vessels (K1181, e.g.) and other sacred objects. (See Schele, et.al in bibliography.) The fish in hand conjuring verb, *tz'akaj*, that appears on K5164 is known to be associated with blood-letting and burned offerings such as those shown on lintels 23-25 at Yaxchilan. On Yaxchilan Lintel 25 we can see the blood stained papers burning and the conjuring serpent rising from the bowl with gaping jaws from which emerges a warrior ancestor. On Yaxchilan Lintels 5, 7 and 32 we see a royal lady holding a sacred bundle. On two of these, Bird Jaguar holds a God K scepter. An even more direct parallel to the God K ceramic vessel snake lady conjuring scenes appears on Lintels 38, 39 and 40 from Yaxchilan. The conjuring verb and *K'awil* appear in the text and God K emerges out of the gaping jaws of all three double-headed serpents on the three lintels, just as God L emerges out of the gaping jaws on the snake lady ceramic vessels. Royal Maya ladies are named as the conjurers, and depicted, on two of the lintels. The third shows a male conjurer who also is named in the text. Interestingly, the dates on the female conjurer lintels correspond to lunar eclipses, one on the date on the lintel (L40), and within four days of a lunar eclipse (L38).

After comparing the texts and scenes from Yaxchilan and the ceramic vessels depicting conjuring scenes, it seems quite likely that the mummy bundles shown on the snake lady conjuring vessels are deified ancestors brought forth through sacred manipulations associated with blood-letting, burned offerings and other sacred rituals. Specifically, I would suggest that the plain bundles held by the women on the Yaxchilan lintels are shown come to life on the God K conjuring vessels as depicted by the deified heads emerging from the tops of the bundles, in similar fashion to the god emerging from the open maws of the conjuring serpent on the same vessels.

SUMMARY

The appearance of God K takes several forms on the ceramic vessels, sometimes making his identification difficult. On the vessels where God K is present unequivocally his role in conjuring ancestors and 'way' beasts in transformative rituals is evident. This identification of God K with conjuring and transformation rites is so consistent that it may not be too much to say that without God K, or the wielding of God K power, conjuring and transformation in the Maya world did not happen. Whether the source of god K's power was astronomical, chthonic or vegetative is not as clear, but all three were probably important, separately and in combination, at different times in Maya history, and at various times within the sacred Maya ritual calendar.

END NOTES

¹ See Taube, Spinden, Thompson and Schele references in bibliography. Most of the characteristics are noted by one or all, but some characteristics I have described myself as I saw them on the vases.

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³ Robiscek, Francis and Hales, Donald, The Maya Book of the Dead, 1981

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⁵ Kerr, Justin, personal communication, Maya Workshop, 2004

⁶ Schele, Freidel and Parker, Maya Cosmos, 1993

⁷Looper, Matthew, Lightning Warrior, 2003

⁸ Op. Cit.

⁹ Kerr, Justin, personal communication at 2004 Maya Meetings

¹⁰ Alexander, Helen, unpublished work on Yaxchilan Str. 16 lintels, link between female conjurers and lunar eclipses (Voyager III, An Interactive Planetarium by Carina Software for all astronomical data)

¹¹ Macri, Martha andLooper, Matthew, The New Catalog of Maya Hieroglyphics, Vol. I, The Classic Period Inscriptions, 2003

¹² Kerr, Justin, Maya Vase Database, 1989-present

¹³ Schultes, Richard Evans, Hoffman, Albert and Ratsch, Christian, Plants of the Gods, 1992

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 17

- ¹⁵Martin, Simon *The Painted King List: A Commentary on Codex-Style Dynastic Vases*, in *The Maya Vase Book*, Vol. 5, 1997
- ¹⁶Breedlove, Dennis A. and Laughlin, Robert, *The Flowering of Man: A Tzotzil Botany of Zinacantan*, 2000
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- ¹⁸de la Cruz, Martinez and Badianus, trans. Emmart, Emily Walcott and Sigerist, Henry E., 1940
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- ²²Kerr, Justin, *Maya Vase Database*
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- ³¹Robertson, Merle Greene, *The Sculpture of Palenque, Vol. I, The Temple of the Inscriptions*, 1983
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- ³³Kerr, op.cit.
- ³⁴Schele, Freidel and Parker, op.cit.
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- ³⁹Schele, Linda, Notebook for the XIIIth Maya Hieroglyphic Workshop at Texas, March 11-12, 1989 and subsequent notebooks are the basis for my readings
- ⁴⁰Martin, Simon, *The Painted King List: A Commentary on Codex-Style Dynastic Vases*, in *The Maya Vase Book*, Vol. 5, 1997

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