

The Way of God L: The Princeton Vase Revisited

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From the Record of the Princeton Art Museum, volume 64, 2005, c.2006

One of the very first vases we rolled out was the Princeton Vase (fig. 1), number K511 in the Maya Vase database.¹ Michael Coe had already published the vase in *The Maya Scribe and His World* (1973), also known as the Grolier catalogue, in which he wrote: "This may well be the finest example of Maya pictorial ceramics yet known; it ranks as one of the greatest masterpieces of aboriginal American art."² Since that time, only a few vases have come on the scene that can challenge that statement. In the Grolier catalogue we published five single images, some close-ups, and a wonderful drawing by Diane Peck. There is no question in my mind that this vase was one of the principal reasons for starting the rollout project. When the Princeton University Art Museum organized an exhibition to celebrate the acquisition of the vase and publish what was to become *Lords of the Underworld*—the first publication anywhere that used rollout photographs—Gillett had the vase sent to us to be rolled out, since up until that time there were only still photographs of the vase (fig. 2).

Figure 1. The Princeton Vase. Guatemala, Northern Petén, Maya, Late Classic, A.D. 600–900. Ceramic with mineral inclusions and orange-red and brown-black slip; h. 21.5 cm., diam. at rim 16.6 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, gift of the Hans A. Widenmann, Class of 1918, and Dorothy Widenmann Foundation (y1975-17).



Figure 2. Rollout photograph of the Princeton Vase (K511, photograph: © Justin Kerr).



Figure 3. God L, detail of the Princeton Vase (photograph: © Justin Kerr).

Figure 4. God L wearing a jaguar cloak, detail of Maya polychrome vase. Chama, Guatemala, Late Classic, A.D. 600–800. Ceramic; h. 17.0 cm., d. 12.4 cm. The Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina, gift of Mr. Andrew A. Lanyi (1982.208.5) (K702), photograph: © Justin Kerr.



Photographs of the Princeton Vase have been published innumerable times in many countries. In 2004, the vase was one of the highlights of the exhibition *Courtly Art of the Maya* at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.³ There are questions still to be answered, however, and interpretations to reconsider. This paper examines the principal character depicted on the vase, God L (his name derives from Paul Schellhas's early-twentieth-century paper in which he gave the Maya gods of the codices letter designations), as well as the tableau of the so-called execution scene being played out in the court of God L in *Xibalba*, the Otherworld.⁴

God L (fig. 3) is portrayed as a lively old man wearing a broad-brimmed hat rimmed with feathers; a raptor bird

adorns the crown of the hat. In some instances the bird is described as an owl, but there exists only one image in the corpus, on a carved vase from Northern Yucatan, where we can definitely say that the bird is an owl.⁵ Other images suggest that the bird is a falcon, but in many cases, the bird's identity is not clear. God L can wear one of two types of cloaks; the one most commonly worn is patterned with a black-and-white design of stepped chevrons and rectangles. The chevron pattern is clear on painted as well as carved and molded vases. The other type, which is not as prevalent, is a cloak of jaguar skin (fig. 4). God L is stooped with age, and on occasion he carries a staff; he is sometimes referred to as *mam* (grandfather). He sports a prominent beaked nose and a sunken, toothless mouth. He smokes cigars and is

associated with tobacco. Frequently he is depicted in the company of young women and may in fact be the aged deity portrayed in Jaina figurines, who is often seen as an old man toying with a young woman, perhaps the Moon Goddess (fig. 5).

On the Princeton Vase, God L is seated on his throne in *Xibalba*, in a court not unlike the palace scenes of mortals. Behind him stand three animated ladies of the court who converse while one pours liquid from a vase; it has been assumed that she is frothing chocolate by pouring it from one container to another.⁶ God L is tying a bracelet of jade beads around the wrist of a young woman (it is of interest to note that even the gods give young ladies expensive gifts). Another girl tries to attract her attention by tapping on her foot, but the young woman is watching the magic trick being performed by the Hero Twins, who are masked to hide their true identities from the court of *Xibalba*. In the tableau, a bound captive, whose arms are marked with god signs signifying his divine status, is about to have his head severed from his neck. The ax wielder, though masked, can be identified as the Hero Twin Hun Ahaw. Under his mask, he wears the ubiquitous headband with a long-nosed deity attached as a frontal piece, a specific reference to the Twins. His hair is done up in a swirl. Behind his ear is the scribal icon, another marker of the Twins, and at his waist he wears the trefoil knot of the Palenque deity G1, associated with Hun Ahaw. His brother, Yax Balam, stands behind him, also wielding an ax. He, too, is masked and wears his barely visible headband under his mask. The nose on his mask is a jaguar paw, indicating that the wearer of this mask is Yax Balam (fig. 6). Their faces are hidden from God L and the court, since the Twins wish to remain unrecognized until they have finished their magic trick. Only then will they reveal their true identities, and their plot to overwhelm and vanquish the Lords of *Xibalba*.⁷

At the foot of God L's throne sits Gillett Griffin's favorite animal, the rabbit scribe, recording the scene in an open codex. The Princeton Vase painter has substituted the rabbit, rather than the usual monkey, as the scribe in this scene. Since the rabbit is the offspring of the Moon Goddess, however, there may be a connection between this rabbit and the young woman, who perhaps is a manifestation of the Moon Goddess.

There are other instances where the rabbit has connections with God L. In the humiliation scene on a codex vessel attributed to the Princeton Vase painter, where God L gets his comeuppance, the artist employs a dwarf as the holder of the items that identify God L: his hat, cape, and staff (fig. 7). On other polychrome vessels, painters depict the rabbit



Figure 5. God L with a young woman. Mexico, Campeche, Jaina, Maya, Late Classic, A.D. 700–900. Ceramic with traces of pigment; h. 24.7 cm. The Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Katherine Margaret Kay Bequest Fund and New Endowment Fund (cat. no. 77.49) (K2881), photograph: © Justin Kerr.



Figure 6. The Hero Twins, detail of the Princeton Vase (photograph: © Justin Kerr).



Figure 7. God L in a Humiliation Scene, detail of Maya vase. Ceramic; h. 16.3 cm., d. 15.0 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (K1560, photograph: © Justin Kerr).

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holding God L's hat, cape, and staff.⁸ It may be of interest to note that in the lowlands, it is God L who is defeated and humiliated by the Hero Twins and their father, the Maize God, whereas in the highlands, it is God N who is the subject of the Twins' wrath (fig. 8).

Though the gods may be tricked and abused and their schemes thwarted, they are never killed, and are shown as

creatures of power to whom honor must be paid and to whom sacrifices are made. At the site of Naranjo, God L is depicted as a supreme deity. On both the Vase of the Seven God⁹ and the Vase of the Eleven Gods (fig. 9), he is portrayed in the role of the leader in this conclave at the Maya dawn of time, *8 Ahaw 4 Cumku* (August 13, 3114 B.C., in our calendar). It is clear, as Michael Coe wrote in 1973, that



Figure 8. God N is pulled from his shell by a Hero Twin, detail of Maya vase. Nebaj, Guatemala, Late Classic, A.D. 600–800. Ceramic; h. 15.2 cm. Lent to the Princeton University Art Museum by Gillett G. Griffin (K2847, photograph: © Justin Kerr).

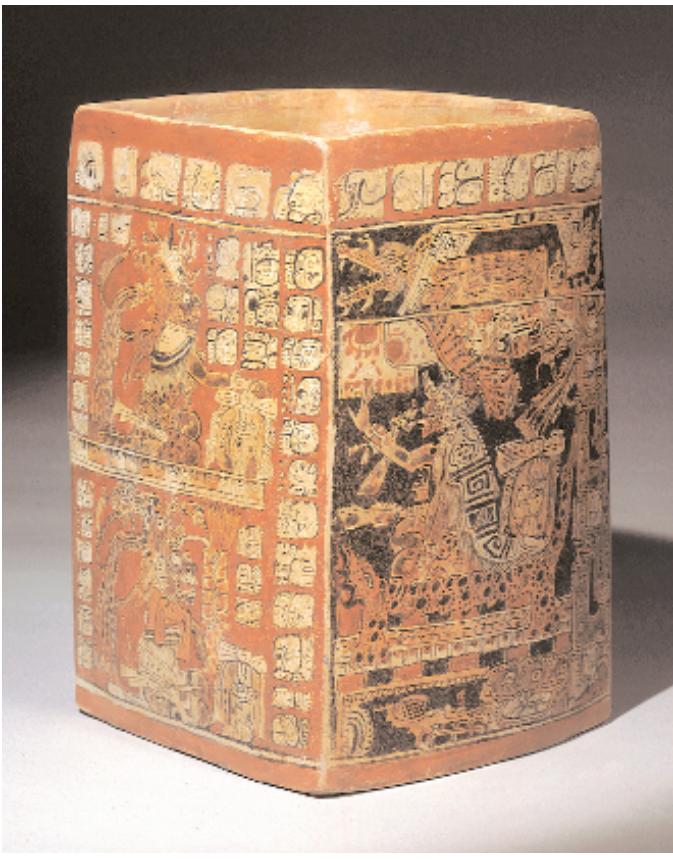


Figure 9. Vase of the Eleven Gods. Private collection (K7750, photograph: © Justin Kerr).

"God L rules in the Underworld."¹⁰ In contrast to the other deities portrayed on these two vases (some of whom have yet to be identified), God L sits on an elaborate jaguar-skin-covered throne. He smokes tobacco and makes a hand sign that perhaps signifies "I speak" or "listen to what I say." Missing on the vases is God L's constant companion, the deity known as Kawil, or God K. On an Early Classic ceramic box, God L shares the prominent frontal space with God K,¹¹ and another polychrome vase depicts a meeting between these two powerful deities. This is also a popular theme on small ceramic flasks, where images of God L and God K frequently adorn the mold-made surfaces.¹² Notwithstanding the red pigment that was often packed inside the flasks when they were used as items in an offering cache, they may have also been used to contain tobacco snuff. On one such small flask, David Stuart has deciphered the Maya word for snuff.¹³ The snuff containers may be similar to this rectangular flask that has an image of God L holding a tobacco leaf in his hand (fig. 10).¹⁴ The user, possibly illiterate, would probably have recognized the presence of tobacco from the image of God L, just as we would recognize a tobacco product upon seeing a camel and a palm tree on a package. In this instance, the artist deals with a very tight space by removing God L's hat and tucking it under his arm.

During the Late Classic to Terminal Classic period (A.D. 750–1300), a number of barrel-shaped, molded vases had a

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Figure 10. Maya flask depicting God L holding a tobacco leaf. Maya region, Mexico, Late Classic, A.D. 600–900. Ceramic; h. 8.9 cm., w. 9.1 cm., d. 5.5 cm. Kislak Flask Collection Number 65, the Jay I. Kislak Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (96.70.0.3) (photograph: © Justin Kerr).

very wide distribution. Examples of such vases have been excavated at Seibal, Altar de Sacrificios, El Cayo, and Copan, along with many specimens lacking a provenance.¹⁵ So many vases of this type with images of God L have surfaced that he must have been extremely popular. On these vases God L usually sits on the head of a *witz*, or personified mountain, and is shown facing his mirror image. Whether offerings were placed in these vessels to honor or appease God L or whether the vessel itself was the offering remains an unanswered question.

At the site of Palenque, God L is a prominent figure in the Cross Group. He shares the spotlight with K'inich Kan B'alam II, who created this group of buildings. K'inich Kan B'alam II was the son of the great ruler K'inich Janaab' Pakal I, whose tomb is in the building called the Temple of Inscriptions, also built by his son. There are a number of interpretations in regard to the iconography and the text imbedded in the Cross Group, and the question arises, "Why is God L such a prominent figure, portrayed as equal in size to K'inich Kan B'alam II?" God L is placed opposite

K'inich Kan B'alam II, directly inside the front façade; he is smoking a cigar, wearing his full regalia of feathered hat, raptor bird, and cloak, and appears very proud and assured (fig. 11).

The text on the panel in the Temple of the Cross begins with K'inich Kan B'alam II setting forth his ancestry, but it is the imagery that best reflects the story line, which concerns the eternal conflict between the Lords of the Otherworld, in this case represented by God L, and the mortal world. K'inich Kan B'alam II becomes the intermediary between the Otherworld and the mortal world, achieving a distinction equal to that of the Hero Twins of the *Popol Vuh*, whose mission it is to conquer the Lords of the Otherworld.¹⁶ By holding God L and the other deities of *Xibalba* in check, they allow the Maya (mortal) world to proceed without the "stone in the road" to trip one up or the "broken piece of the *metate* in the tortilla" on which to break a tooth, which, aside from various diseases and catastrophes, is the kind of mischief that is blamed on the gods.

As one travels through the Cross Group and arrives at the Temple of the Sun, one encounters God L, with his bird headdress and chevron cloak, groveling at the feet of K'inich Kan B'alam II (fig. 12), in striking contrast to his proud demeanor in the Temple of the Cross. Here God L is acting the part of a captive, supporting a serpent bar. His companion in defeat is perhaps also a manifestation of God L, as he wears the same feathered hat. It is of interest to note that one figure wears the chevron-patterned cloak, whereas the other wears the jaguar-skin cloak, a rare representation of the dual nature of God L. Also, one captive is wearing the usual bird in his hat, while the other wears a snake. It is apparent in this scene that the gods are being humiliated; their power is broken, they are defeated and suppressed, reminiscent of the images on such painted vases as the one in figure 7.

In 1989, Steve Houston and David Stuart published a paper entitled "Way Glyph: Evidence for Co-Essences among the Classic Maya."¹⁷ At the same time, Nikolai Grube circulated a letter proposing a similar interpretation. Their subject was a glyph that had been known as the half-spotted *ahaw*. The form of the *way* glyph itself is of interest. On some vessels, it is drawn as an *ahaw* glyph with a patch of jaguar skin inserted on one half. It alludes to transformation

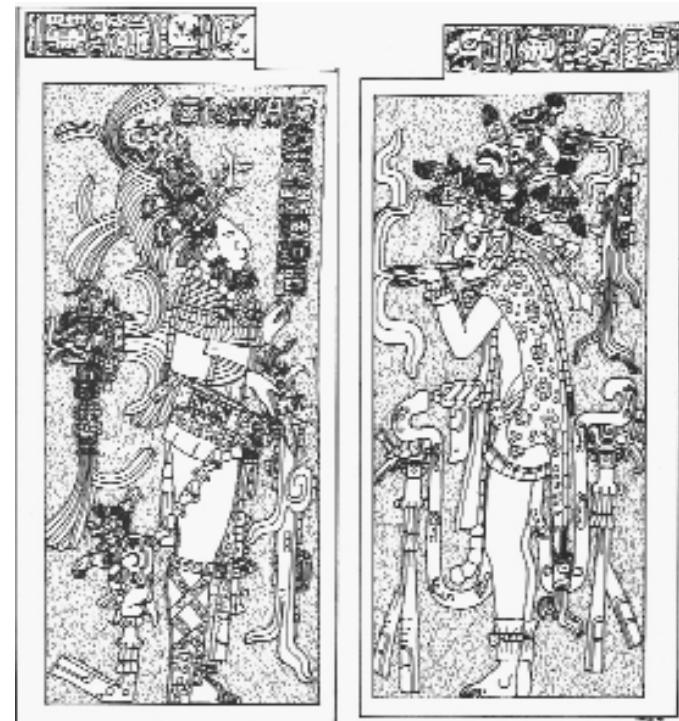


Figure 11. Detail of the façade of the Temple of the Cross, Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico (drawing: Linda Schele).



Figure 12. Detail of the interior panel of the Temple of the Sun, Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico (drawing: Linda Schele).

to the animal spirit. Upon examining different versions of the glyph, however, the form is slightly changed, with the addition of another component. On some polychrome vases, the jaguar half of the glyph has extensions or loops; the same loops also appear on a number of throne cushions that obviously were used for tying or lashing the jaguar skin around the body of the cushion. If there is an image from which the glyph is derived, I suspect that it is from this type of throne cushion and that the cushions or throne backs may serve a function other than comfort; that is, as a sacred bundle. Such a bundle would perhaps have held the ruler's ritual objects: crystals, trophies, possibly tobacco, cacao beans, and incense. In fact, we can see this bundle being carried in a ruler's funeral procession to be included as part of the grave goods.¹⁸ This sacred bundle may then be the form that suggested the construction of the *way* glyph.

But what is the *way*? The basic concept suggests that all creatures have a *way*, which is a co-essence, an animal spirit, a daemon, or other form into which one might transform. This belief is demonstrated in a contemporary story from Yucatan, in which a young man awakens every morning knowing that he has had sexual relations during the night, but he does not know with whom. One night he keeps himself awake, and as he feigns sleep, a large female dog enters his hut and tries to mount him. The young man takes his shotgun and shoots the dog, wounding it as it runs away. The next day the village learns that the wife of a shaman



Figure 13. Comparison of the designs on God L's cloak and on the carapace of the armadillo. Composite photograph of details from the Princeton Vase and Maya vase K3332 (photograph: © Justin Kerr).

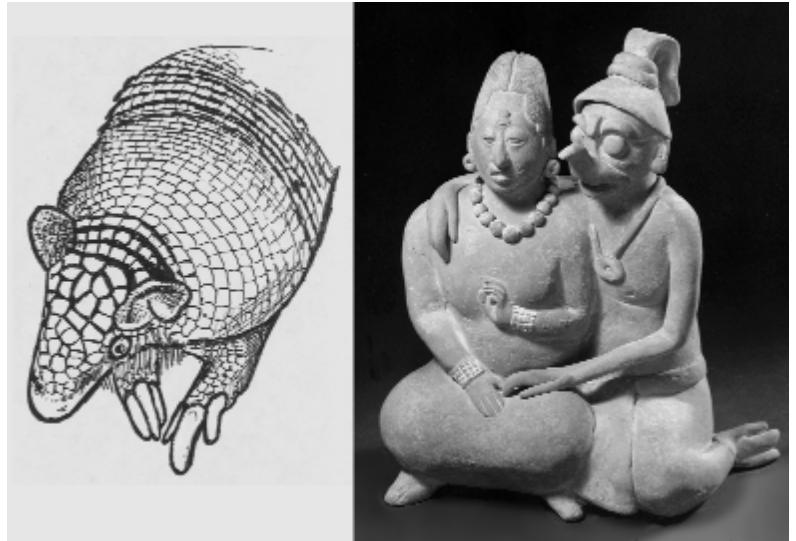


Figure 14. Drawing of an armadillo and a Jaina figurine of a woman and God L's way. Private collection (photograph: © Justin Kerr).



Figure 15. Details depicting God L tying a bracelet on a lady's wrist. Left: the Princeton Vase, right: Maya vase. Private collection (K511; K1227), photograph: © Justin Kerr).

from a neighboring village died with blood on her *huipil*. This type of shape-shifting is part and parcel of the concept of transformation, of the shaman's ability to change into a jaguar or other creature with supernatural powers.

The gods have their *ways* as well. God K, whose leg transforms into Och Chan, the great serpent of *Xibalba*, carries his *way* with him.¹⁹ Another example is the relationship between the deity Itzamna and his counterpart, the great bird Itzam Yeh. In a number of instances, the *way* is depicted as a zoomorphic or anthropomorphic composite, with the body of an animal and a humanoid face.²⁰

Does God L have a *way* or an animal counterpart? Evidence suggests that he does. When we examine the armadillos portrayed on the vases, there is a surprising similarity between the accessories of the armadillos and those of God L. Both the armadillo drummer and God L wear the same broad-brimmed hat, and there is a remarkable correspondence between the chevron pattern on God L's cloak and the pattern of the armadillo's carapace (fig. 13). The armadillo as an animal counterpart is also suggested on a particular Jaina figurine. This figurine can be compared with other Jaina figurines portraying God L as an old man fondling a young

woman. In this example, a creature sits next to a young woman with his arm around her shoulders. The creature may be identified as an armadillo by noting the similarity of the large digging toe of the armadillo and the hands and toes of this creature (fig. 14). This would appear to be a clear case of substitution.

Most surprising is another image that links God L and the armadillo even more closely. It is an image on a codex-style vase where an armadillo is tying a bracelet around the wrist of a young woman, in an action identical to the one performed by God L on the Princeton Vase. In the entire corpus of Maya images known to me, only these two vases depict a woman having a bracelet tied on her wrist (fig. 15). Unfortunately, one cannot compare the two artists: one a genius and the other, perhaps ambitious but with little talent.

In the Maya Otherworld the deities live side by side with their animal counterparts and can transform between these guises. God K and the serpent Itzamna, God D and the bird Itzam Yeh, and God L and the armadillo are all part of the Maya pantheon of spirits and daemons that inhabit this world and their own.

NOTES

1. The Maya Vase rollout project is a corpus of peripheral, 360°-view photographs of Maya vases. Six volumes have been published to date comprising approximately 750 rollouts. These rollouts, plus an additional 800, are available online in a searchable database at <http://www.famsi.org/research/kerr/index.html>.
2. Michael D. Coe, *The Maya Scribe and His World* (New York, 1973), 91.
3. Mary Miller and Simon Martin, *Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya*, exh. cat., (New York, 2004).
4. Paul Shellhas, "Representations of Deities of the Maya Manuscripts," Harvard University, Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Papers 4, no. 1 (1904).
5. Justin Kerr, *The Maya Vase Book*, vol. 4, ed. Barbara Kerr (New York, 1994), 613, K4924.
6. Miller and Martin, *Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya*, 76.
7. *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya*, trans. Allen J. Christenson (Alresford, U.K., 2003).
8. Justin Kerr, The Maya Vase Database, 2001; <http://research.famsi.org/kerrmaya.html>, K2796.
9. Justin Kerr, *The Maya Vase Book*, vol. 1, ed. Barbara Kerr (New York, 1989), 81, K2796.
10. Coe, *Maya Scribe*, 107.
11. Justin Kerr, The Maya Vase Database, 1998; <http://research.famsi.org/kerrmaya.html>, K3801.
12. Justin Kerr, The Precolumbian Portfolio, 2004; <http://research.famsi.org/kerrportfolio.html>, K7121.
13. David Stuart, personal communication.
14. Justin Kerr, The Precolumbian Portfolio, 2005; <http://research.famsi.org/kerrportfolio.html>, K6279c.
15. Kerr, Maya Vase Database, 1998 (see n. 10), K6575.
16. Justin Kerr, "The Myth of the *Popol Vuh* as an Instrument of Power," in *New Theories on the Ancient Maya*, ed. Elin C. Danien and Robert J. Sharer (Philadelphia, 1992), 109–21.
17. Stephen D. Houston and David Stuart, "Way Glyph: Evidence for Co-essences among the Classic Maya," *Center for Maya Research, Reports on Ancient Maya Writing* 30 (Washington, D.C., 1989).
18. Justin Kerr, *The Maya Vase Book*, vol. 6, ed. Barbara Kerr (New York, 2000), 933, K5534.
19. Ibid., 926, K5164.
20. Justin Kerr, *The Maya Vase Book*, vol. 3, ed. Barbara Kerr (New York, 1992), 445, K3863.