

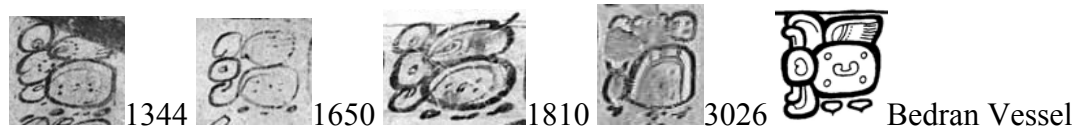
A Short Note on a Unique Vessel Type Spelling: **yu-k'i?-b'i-li**

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In the past ten years the author has set up a database in which at present over 575 Primary Standard Sequences (cf. Coe 1973) on Classic Maya ceramics can be found. Within this database over 25 different vessel types can be recognized, some of which are common while others are rare or even unique (cf. Boot n.d.). The most common vessel type is spelled **yu-k'i?-b'i** for *yuk'ib'* "(it is) the drink-instrument (of/for)"; a variant spelling for this vessel type is **yu-k'i?-b'i-la**. This spelling leads to *yuk'ib'iil*, which contains an *-iil* possessive suffix ¹.

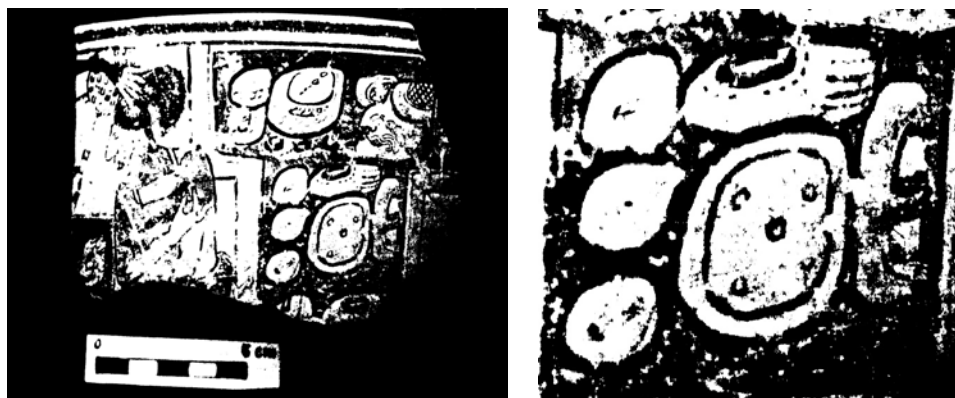
In the database there are at present 22 examples of the spelling **yu-k'i?-b'i-la**. For instance (numbers associated with the images refer to a Kerr Archive rollout photographic image):



Vessels painted in the so-called Nebaj-style, of which the Fenton Vase (The British Museum, London) is probably the best-known example, also contain the *yuk'ib'* collocation:



These examples, although using on occasion different hieroglyphic signs, spell **yu-k'i?-b'i** for *yuk'ib'*. I recently came across an additional example of a Nebaj-style ceramic vessel, actually only a small sherd (Castro 1995: Tafel 7) ²:



The small sherd contains part of the Primary Standard Sequence, once contained in a T-shaped panel. The remaining iconography suggests that the original scene was very close to Kerr No. 0558, a Nebaj-style vessel now residing in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (inv. no. 1988.1170, cf. www.mfa.org) ³:



(rollout photograph by Justin Kerr)

The surviving part of the text opens with the Initial Sign (typical to the Nebaj-style spelled **'a-ja-ya**) and the God N verb (**T'AB'?**-**yi**), after which probably the sequence **'u tz'i b'a-li** could be found (this part is lost; compare to Kerr No. 0558 above). The text continues with the vessel type collocation; here it is spelled **yu-k'i?-b'i-li**, a unique vowel harmonic spelling in contrast to the more common **yu-k'i?-b'i-la** spellings. This new spelling can be compared to the unique vessel type *pa'chan lak uwe'ib'il* in which *uwe'ib'il* is spelled **'u WE' 'i b'i-li** on a Uaxactun-style plate (cf. Boot 2003). Also the glyphic spelling of that vessel type collocation ended in **-b'i-li** for an *-il* possessive suffix.

What does this new spelling indicate? The more common spelling **yu-k'i?-b'i-la** ends in a pair of disharmonic syllabic signs **-b'i-la**. According to research by Houston, Stuart, and Robertson (1998, 2004) and Lacadena and Wichmann (2004) disharmony is a scribal convention through which in Classic Maya writing vowel complexity was regulated. The spelling ending in **-b'i-la** would lead to a long vowel, as in *-iil*. Following their principles (which differ somewhat between the two sets of researchers), harmony (as here in **yu-k'i?-bi-li**) was a convention in which a simple vowel would be indicated. As the disharmonic spelling **yu-k'i?-b'i-la** has greater ancestry, the occurrence of the spelling **yu-k'i?-b'i-li** on the Nebaj-style sherd would indicate the loss of vowel complexity (in this case vowel length) and thus a phonological evolution of the possessive suffix *-iil* to *-il*⁴.

The Nebaj-style sherd with the unique spelling **yu-k'i?-b'i-li** and the Uaxactun-style plate with the unique spelling **'u-WE'-'i-b'i-li** may both be indicative of the loss of vowel complexity in the *-iil* possessive suffix towards the end of the Classic period.

Notes

- 1) In the transcription of Maya hieroglyphic writing, logographic signs are transcribed in boldface type upper case letters (e.g. **WE'**), while syllabic signs are transcribed in boldface type lower case letters (e.g. **yu**). If doubt exists on the transcribed value it is indicated through an added query (e.g. **k'i?**). Transliterations are placed into italics (e.g. *yuk'ib'*).
- 2) Photograph of the Nebaj-style sherd was provided to Castro by Dieter Dütting.
- 3) Characteristics (note headdress, facial expression, pectoral, and body painting) of the male human figure on the left side of the sherd as well as epigraphic details of the hieroglyphic signs as

employed in the Initial Sign, God N, and the vessel type collocation itself are suggestive of the fact that the painter of Kerr No. 0558 and this sherd were the same.

4) While I do apply the spelling principles of vowel complexity in this short note, this does not mean I accept these principles. Actually, I do not. However, to explain in some detail my own perspective on the matter as well as a solution for the two spellings would mean to deviate from the intent of writing this note, to present and disseminate the unique spelling **yu-k'i?-b'i-li**. I leave my explanation for a future occasion.

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