

Otot as a Vessel Classification for a Footed Bowl: Short Epigraphic Note on a Bowl in the Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

by Erik Boot (email: wukyabnal@hotmail.com)
January 27, 2009. Rijswijk, the Netherlands

The collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, MA, contains a large selection of Classic Maya ceramics (URL: <http://www.mfa.org>), of which only a small part is shown in the permanent exhibit on the Americas (personal visit: June 4, 2008). The ceramics on display rank among the most important ever produced by Maya painter-scribes in regard to both craftsmanship and subject matter (and include, among others, Kerr Nos. 1440, 1872, and 5723). However, the much larger selection of Maya ceramics not on display also contains important objects, one of which is the subject of this short note.

Description

This unprovenanced object is a ceramic footed bowl, with a height of 10.79 cm and a diameter of 9.52 cm. The bowl is painted in Holmul-style (red-and-orange-on-cream),¹ with a dedicatory text (a.k.a. Primary Standard Sequence, cf. Coe 1973) along the rim, while the body of the vessel is painted with a row of long-necked water birds (Figure 1). At one time, after firing, part of the bowl was covered with a thin Maya Blue colored stucco layer, vestiges of which still can be found on the basal foot and along the rim. The bowl was collected between 1974 and 1981 by John Fulling, Art Collectors of November, Inc., Florida (a collection that became known as the “November Collection”). In 1987, the footed bowl passed to Landon T. Clay, who ultimately presented the bowl as a gift to the Museum of Fine Arts in December of 1988. As part of the Maya Survey this footed bowl has been cataloged as MS1079 (based on information derived from the MFA website).

Image and Text

The body of the footed bowl is painted with an encircling row of five long-necked water birds; most probably these are cormorants (note the bent tip of the beak, the spread wings, tail, and the legs and feet). Along the rim of the bowl a hieroglyphic text is painted, which is my main concern here (Figure 1).

The text along the rim can be identified as a dedicatory text, in which there is substantial regional variation. The dedicatory text on this vessel consists of thirteen glyph blocks. Unfortunately, three collocations have suffered from erosion, probably because the footed bowl rested on this side on the floor of its final resting place (probably a burial). Here follow my transcription and transliteration:²

A	'a-LAY-ya	<i>alay</i>
B	K'AL-la-ja	<i>k'a[h]laj</i>
C	'u-tz'i-bi	
D	NAH/na-ja-la	<i>utz'ibnajal</i>
E	yo-'OTOT	<i>yotot</i>
F	ta-[tzi]hi	<i>ta tzihi[il kakaw?]</i>
G	K'AWIL-la?	<i>k'awil</i>
H	BALAM-ma	<i>balam</i>
I	[THRONE?]NAL-la	<i>? nal</i>
J	CHAK-SERPENT	<i>chak</i> “serpent”
K	PORTRAIT.HEAD	<i>(?)</i>
L	'AJ?-?-na	<i>aj(?) (?-)-n</i>
M	JAGUAR.EYE-li-bi	<i>“jaguar-eye”-lib</i>



Figure 1 - Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, footed bowl in Holmul Style, inv. no. 1988.1284
(all photographs by MFA Boston, digitally enhanced and edited by the author)

The dedicatory text begins with *alay k'a[h]laj utz'ibnajal* “here the writing is presented,” a variation of the common opening on ceramics in the Holmul tradition. Most opening sections in this tradition prefer the God.N dedicatory verb (e.g. Kerr Nos. 5648, 5977, 8088), still not satisfactorily deciphered. This footed bowl shares the *k'al-* dedicatory verb with Kerr No. 5723, a tripod plate painted in the Holmul tradition (Figure 2; at arrow note [K'AL]ja).³

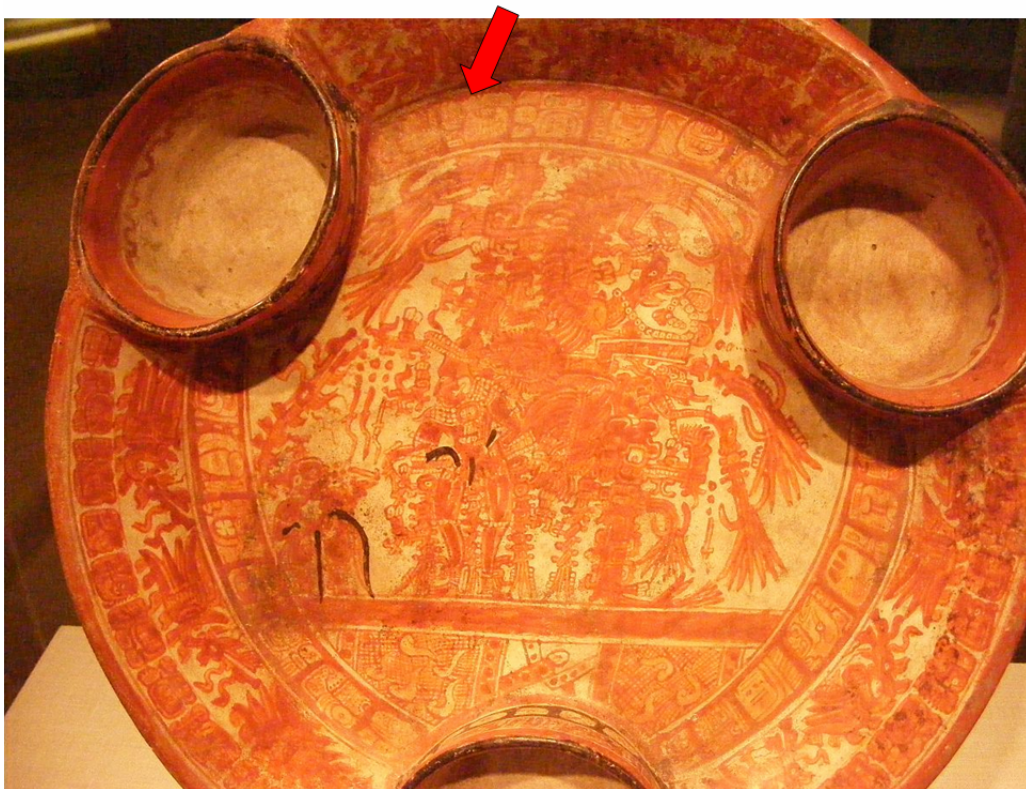


Figure 2 - Holmul style “chip-and-dip plate,” on exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) (cataloged as Kerr No. 5723 & MS0605) (photograph by the author, taken on June 4, 2008)

The text on the footed bowl continues with the collocation that provides the vessel type. The vessel type is written as **yo-’OTOT** or *yotot* “(it is) the house (in the sense of home).”⁴

This is a rare example of the hieroglyphic *otot* classification of a ceramic vessel (Grube and Gaida 2006: 189; Houston 1998: 349; Houston, Stuart, and Taube 1989: 724; Stuart 1998: 409; Taube 1994: 652). The *otot* classification can be found on a limited number of ceramic and wooden objects, for instance on a lidded carved cache vessel from Tikal (Figure 3a), a small ceramic bottle painted in Codex Style (Figure 3b), an incised Chochola ceramic bottle (Figure 3c), and on at least three plates in an elaborate metaphorical expression (Figure 3d-f). The carved vessel from Tikal provides the spelling **yo-’OTOT** for *yotot*. The painted small bottle contains a single collocation on one side spelling **yo-to[ti]** for *yotot*. The incised small bottle also contains a spelling [**yo**]to-ti, but employs an alternative sign for **yo** and a different composition. Both small bottles were originally stoppered. The longer metaphorical expressions on the plates can be transcribed as follows: On the first plate as **’u la ka yo-’OTOT-ti ’u-K’IN-ni-li ’u-CHAN-li** for *ulak yotot uk’inil uchanil* “the plate, the house (in the sense of home) of the sun, the sky,” on the second plate as **yo-’OTOT ’u K’IN-ni-li** for *yotot uk’inil* “the house (in the sense of home) of the sun.” On the third plate the shortened expression can be found spelled in a slightly different way as **yo-’OTOT ti ’u K’IN-ni-li** “the house (in the sense of home) of the sun.”

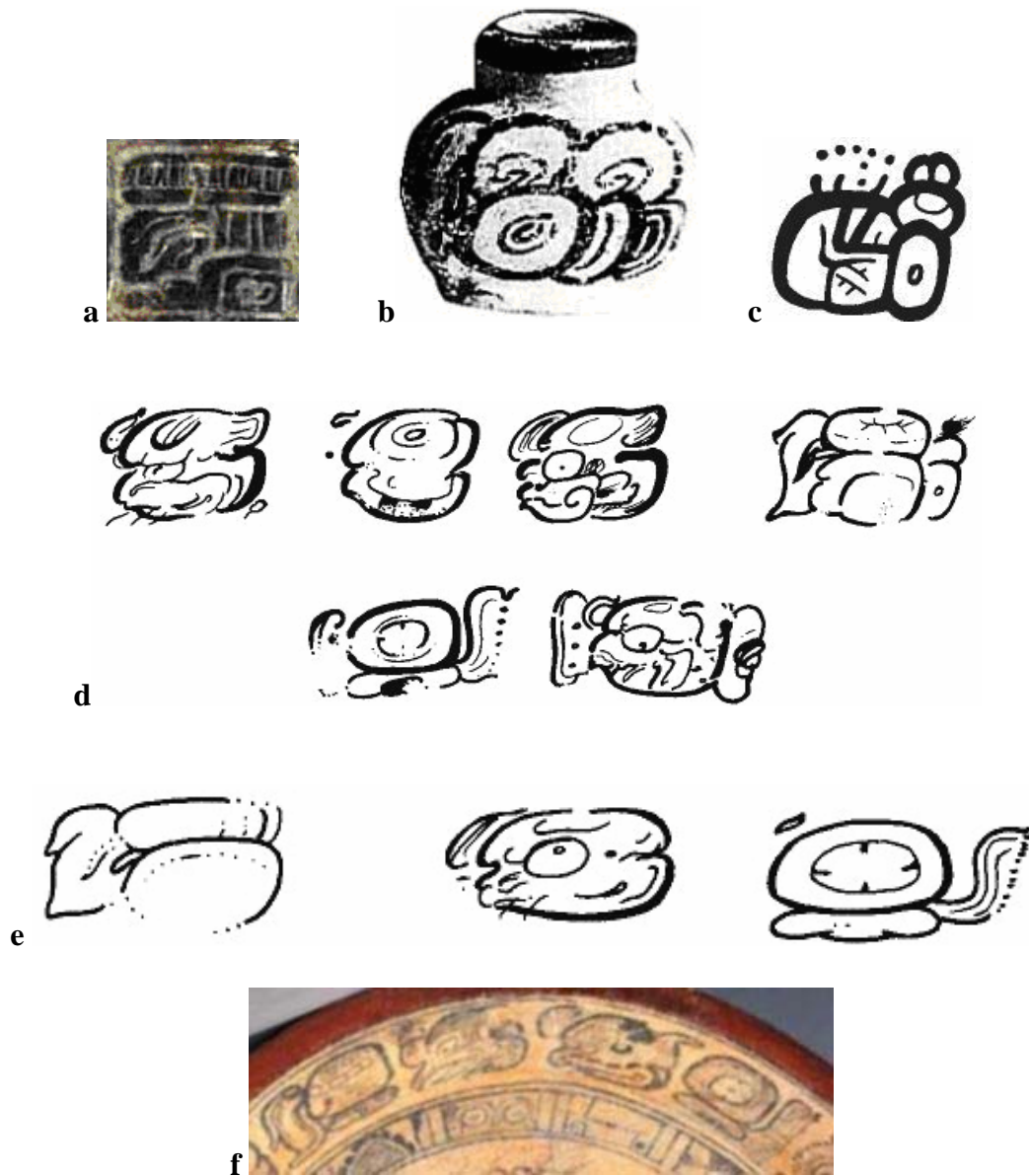


Figure 3 - Examples of ceramic objects as *otot*, a) Tikal, Cache 198 (Kerr No. 8009), b) Robicsek and Hales 1981: Table 20-B, c) Small bottle, Museum für Ethnologie, Berlin, d) Plate in Dumbarton Oaks Photographic Archive, e) Plate in Dumbarton Oaks Photographic Archive, f) Kerr No. 7185 (all drawings by Stephen Houston, after Houston 1998: Figure 13; photographs of Kerr Nos. 8009 & 7185 by Justin Kerr)

The examples illustrated in Figure 3 show that primarily small ceramic bottles and plates are known to have been classified as *otot*. The footed bowl in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston can now be added to this small group of containers marked as *otot*. Also a wooden box (of unknown provenance, but mentioning king Balam Ajaw of Tortuguero) is marked as an *otot* (Houston 1998: Figure 13f).

Footed bowls or cups are quite rare among the large selection of Classic Maya ceramics, some of which can be found in the archives maintained by Justin Kerr. Examples of footed bowls or cups are vessels cataloged as Kerr Nos. 0319, 5383, 5758, 6557, 7042, 7524, 8722 (before restoration and repainting; after cataloged as 8837), and 8922 (Figure 4).



Figure 4 - A selection of footed bowls and cups (first row: Kerr Nos. 0139, 5383, 5758; second row: Kerr Nos. 6557, 7042, 7524; third row: Kerr Nos. 8722, 8922) (all photographs by Justin Kerr)

Of this small selection of footed bowls or cups only five contain hieroglyphic texts and four of these texts provide the vessel type through which these ceramic containers were classified. Kerr Nos. 7524, 8722, and 8922 (both with lid)⁵ provide spellings for *yuk'ib* “the drink-instrument,” after which the vessel contents is revealed (on Kerr No. 8722, although painted by a master scribe, the dedicatory text is in mixed order; also the vessel contents is ordered differently).

The dedicatory text on the footed bowl marked as *otot* also continues with the vessel contents, in this case **ta-[tzi]hi** for *ta tzih*. This may be an abbreviated version of *ta tzih[il kakaw]* “for fresh(?) cacao.” Future chemical residue analysis, if the inside of the bowl has not been cleaned too drastically, may provide the definitive answer on the true Classic Maya contents of this footed bowl.

The text continues with the name of the owner or patron of the vessel. This nominal phrase opens with **K'AWIL-la? BALAM-ma** for K'awil Balam, but the next five collocations contain one or more signs that either remain without decipherment or are too eroded to be identified properly (see transcription and transliteration above).⁶



Figure 5 - The collocation JAGUAR.EYE-**li-bi** and **-ni-bi** on Holmul ceramics, at Topoxte, and at Naranjo, a) MFA Boston Footed Bowl, b) Kerr No. 8088, c) Topoxte Mirror Back: O-P (drawing by Nikolai Grube), d) Jaguar God of the Underworld/GIII name glyph on a plate from Dos Pilas (photograph by Harri Kettunen), e) Naranjo Stela 13, Back: E15-F16, e) Naranjo Stela 21, Front: B11-B13 (drawings by Ian Graham)

The last of these five collocations spells JAGUAR.EYE-**li-bi** (Figure 5a)⁷ and this collocation deserves some further attention. A similar spelling ending in **-li-bi** occurs in the dedicatory rim text on Kerr No. 8088, also a Holmul style ceramic vessel, but here the JAGUAR.EYE is replaced by a variant spelling using an anthropomorphic head (Figure 5b). I take these two spellings to be related to the spelling JAGUAR.GOD-**ni-bi** that occurs in the titular section of a person mentioned on the Topoxte Mirror Back (Figure 5c). This title refers to the name of the Jaguar God of the Underworld (a.k.a. God of Number 7, GIII of the Palenque Triad), which on a rare occasion appears in the titular section of a Motul de San José king painted on a plate excavated at Dos Pilas (Figure 5d). The JAGUAR.EYE-**ni-bi** title also appears as a title employed by the Naranjo rulers mentioned on Stela 13, K'ak' Ukalaw Chan Chak, and Stela 21, K'ak' Tiliw Chan Chak (Figure 5e-f, Figure 6).

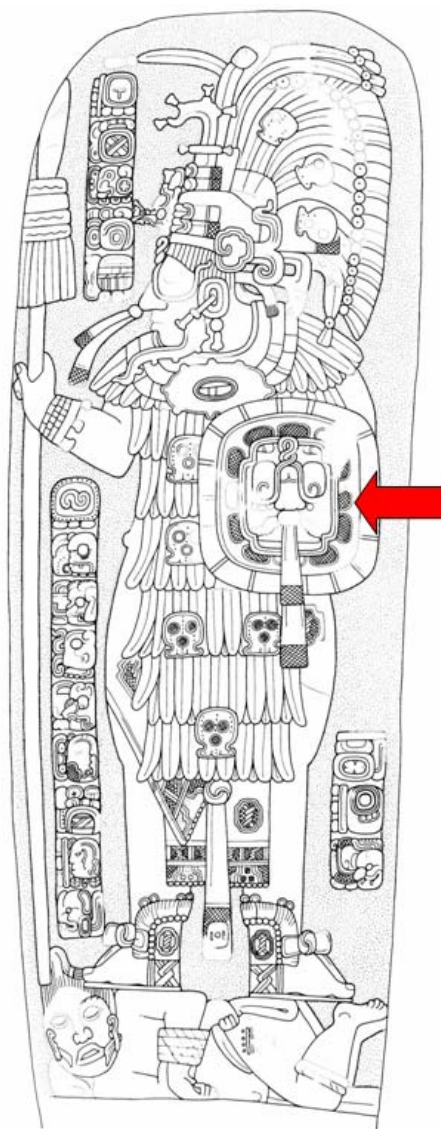


Figure 5 - Naranjo, Stela 21 (drawing by Ian Graham). The arrow points to the shield containing the portrait head of the Jaguar God of the Underworld placed within a cartouche that defines the name glyph on the Holmul footed bowl and at Naranjo

As space is limited in this note, here it will suffice to state that I take the JAGUAR.EYE (Figure 5a, d-e) and variant signs (Figure 5b, c) to stand for a noun (the name of a supernatural entity, i.e. the Jaguar God of the Underworld, God of Number 7, or GIII), followed by a suffix *-l-* (descending from **-Vl-*) or *-n-* (descending from **-an-*) to derive an intransitive verb root. The final suffix is the suffix *-ib* (or *-Vb*, “place of; instrumental suffix,” cf. Campbell 2004: 77) to derive an instrumental noun which ultimately served as a title in this text.

Final Remarks

The subject of this short note is a footed bowl in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. This bowl is identified through a rare vessel type classification, namely as *otot* “house (in the sense of home).” This vessel classification probably is a metaphor and it can be found on a small selection of portable objects like small painted and incised ceramic bottles, large ceramic plates, and a wooden box. This vessel classification probably depended on the specific function of the footed bowl (and other

portable objects named *otot*) in Classic Maya ceremonies. Possibly the ceremonial context is comparable to certain ceramic pots used among the Lacandon which were referred to as *nahk'uh* “god houses” (Houston 1998: 349).

Perhaps the *otot* classification on the footed bowl is an abbreviation of the more extensive metaphors as known from at least three plates (perhaps on the footed bowl abbreviated from an expression *yuk'ib yotot uk'inil uchanil*),⁸ but this can not be proven yet. At present the owner or patron mentioned on this vessel is not yet known from another hieroglyphic text. His nominal phrase opens with K'awil Balam and ends with a title JAGUAR.EYE-*l-ib*, a variant of the title JAGUAR.EYE-*n-ib* as known at Topoxte and Naranjo.

In conclusion, the footed bowl in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has added an important example to the small corpus of containers marked as *otot* “house (in the sense of home).” This corpus now contains a lidded carved, cylindrical cache vessel, small (stoppered) bottles, plates, a wooden box, and a footed bowl. Further research may identify additional examples in either public or private collections, or perhaps these are encountered in future archaeological excavations.

Acknowledgments

I thank Justin Kerr for providing comments on an earlier version of this essay. Remaining mistakes and/or fallacies are the sole responsibility of the author. As always, unless stated otherwise, all opinions expressed in this essay are mine.

Endnotes

1) The Holmul tradition with its typical red-and-orange-on-cream color scheme is named for the archaeological site of Holmul, at which place several ceramics in this style were excavated in 1911 (among those a tripod plate and a tall cylindrical vessel, both illustrating the dancing Maize God, commonly referred to as the “Holmul Dancer”). These ceramics are now in the collection of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. For an illustration of the plate, see Reents-Budet 1994: 180.

2) In transcription, boldface upper case letters refer to logographic signs (e.g. **LAY**) and boldface lower case letters refer to syllabic signs (e.g. **li**). Hieroglyphic signs with no (accepted) decipherment yet are provided with a descriptive term (e.g. GOD.N). Transliterations are placed in italics (e.g. *alay*). In this essay there is no reconstruction of complex vowels. T-numbers refer to the hieroglyphic signs as cataloged by Thompson (1962).

3) The order of the signs looks like **ja-K'AL**, but T181 **ja** is an “abbreviated” variant of T683b **ja**. More precisely, T181 is not an actual abbreviation, as its origin lies in the common Classic Maya process of layering or stacking hieroglyphic signs. On the plate **ja** and **K'AL** are layered or stacked and the actual reading order is thus [**K'AL**]**ja**, in which the square brackets indicate the sign (**K'AL**) layered upon a lower level sign (**ja**).

The floor of this tripod plate features a dancing Maize God, carrying a large backpack (featuring the avian manifestation of God D), and who is accompanied by a dwarf. Three “cups” are placed on the floor of the plate, breaking up the text in three segments (as well as the sloping rim). This narrative is encircled by the dedicatory text. The sloping inner rim of the plate contains a row of cormorants, just like the Holmul footed bowl at the Museum of Fine Arts, and another hieroglyphic text (which actually is a pseudo-text due to the drawing style, the repetitive nature, and the opaque contents of the text). For an additional photograph of the plate and drawings of the two texts, see Reents Budet 1994: 84-85.

4) As Stuart described in 1998, Maya languages distinguish between *nah* “building, structure; household group” and *otot~otoch* “dwelling, domicile; home” (Stuart 1998: 376).

5) The carved vessel from Tikal (Kerr No. 8009), containing a *yotot* collocation, is also a lidded vessel. Perhaps not coincidental, the dedicatory text containing the *yotot* classification is written *on* the lid (see illustration in Harrison 1999: 77). As Taube noted, “lidded or stoppered vessels were conceived of as houses or *otot* by the Classic Maya” (Taube 1994: 652, note 1; emphasis in original). The fact that the footed bowls cataloged as Kerr

Nos. 8922 are lidded may be indicative of the fact that the Classic Maya considered these two vessels as “roofed,” and perhaps by extension as houses (although the dedicatory texts provide no *otot* classification). Perhaps at one time the footed bowl at the Museum of Fine Arts was lidded.

The plates with the extended metaphorical expression [*ulak*] *yotot uk'inil* [*uchanil*] seem to form a separate category among the containers that are classified as *yotot*. Frequently plates have been found inverted (e.g. Tikal, Burial 196; cf. Harrison 1999: 163), with their inside bottom turned over to face down. Some plates were placed face down over the head of the deceased (e.g. as at Altar de Sacrificios, cf. McKillop 2004: 214). As such they may have served as covers or lids and perhaps ultimately they may have been envisioned as “roofs” of a home that was connected to the *k'inil* (“sun-thing”) and *chanil* (“sky-thing”). These plates as covers or “roofs” were not permanent in the strictest sense of the word; drill holes are present in many of them (like the plate that contains the phrase *ulak yotot uk'inil uchanil* illustrated in Figure 3d; Dumbarton Oak Slide Archive, slide LC-p2-162), which may have served the purpose of releasing some kind of matter. The drill holes are also known as kill holes and breath holes.

6) The **CHAK-SERPENT.SIGN** collocation at position J contains a rare sign depicting the full body of a serpent. Most probably the same sign appears in the inscription of Yaxchilan Stela 32 (at B3, prefixed with **K'AK'-k'a** and with a postfixed **-na**) and possibly in the inscription of Dumbarton Oaks Panel 2 (at R, prefixed with T122 **K'AK'** and infixed with T566 **MAN**). Is the T554 **SERPENT.SIGN** perhaps the somatomorphic or full-figure variant for T566 **MAN**? If so, **-na** would serve as postfixed phonetic complement (compare to **xa-T566-na** > **xa-MAN-na** for *xaman* “north,” e.g. Palenque, Temple of the Cross Tablet: C13).

7) **JAGUAR.EYE** is but an descriptive term. The sign seems to depict the scroll of the jaguar eye inside a cartouche marked by cross-hatched elements. The shield on Naranjo Stela 21 depicts the head of the jaguar god inside the cartouche marked by small cross-hatched elements (see Figure 6). Note the scroll inside the eyes of the jaguar god.

8) The reconstructed expression *yuk'ib yotot uk'inil uchanil* is based on the existing *ulak yotot uk'inil uchanil* expression on plates. Both expressions would thus contain the common vessel type markers *uk'ib* “drink-instrument” and *lak* “plate.” Possibly also the *yotot* expression on the wooden box from Tortuguero is an abbreviation of a more complex metaphorical expression.

References

Campbell, Lyle

2004 *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction*. Second edition. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.

Coe, Michael D.

1973 *The Maya Scribe and His World*. New York, NY: The Grolier Club.

Grube, Nikolai, and Maria Gaida

2006 *Die Maya: Schrift und Kunst*. Berlin and Cologne, Germany: SMB-Dumont.

Harrison, Peter D.

1999 *The Lords of Tikal: Rulers of an Ancient Maya City*. New York and London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd.

Houston, Stephen D.

1998 Classic Maya Depictions of the Built Environment. In *Function and Meaning of Classic Maya Architecture*, edited by Stephen D. Houston, pp. 333-372. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks. Electronic version of this article is available at URL <<http://www.doaks.org/ClassicMaya/houston09.pdf>>.

- Houston, Stephen D., David Stuart, and Karl A. Taube
1989 Folk Classification of Classic Maya Pottery. In *American Anthropologist*, 91 (3): 720–726.
- McKillop, Heather
2004 *The Ancient Maya: New Perspectives*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
n.d. *Museum of Fine Arts Website*. URL: <http://www.mfa.org>
- Reents-Budet, Dorie
1994 *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Robicsek, Francis, and Donald M. Hales
1981 *The Maya Book of the Dead: The Ceramic Codex*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Stuart, David
1998 “The Fire Enters His House”: Architecture and Ritual in Classic Maya Texts. In *Function and Meaning of Classic Maya Architecture*, edited by Stephen D. Houston, pp. 333-372. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks. Electronic version of this article is available at URL <<http://www.doaks.org/ClassicMaya/houston10.pdf>>.
- Taube, Karl A.
1994 The Birth Vase: Natal Imagery in Ancient Maya Myth and Ritual. In *The Maya Vase Book*, Vol. 4, edited by Justin Kerr, pp. 652-685. New York, NY: Kerr Associates.
- Thompson, J. Eric S.
1962 *A Catalog of Maya Hieroglyphs*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma.

File History

First version: July 24, 2008
Revised: January 23, 25, & 27, 2009
This version: January 27, 2009