Figure 1. Cylinder vessel depicting a mythic scene. Maya, El Zotz or vicinity (?), Petén, Guatemala. Late Classic, A.D. 650–800. Ceramic with polychrome slip, h. 21.5 cm., diam. 15.0 cm. Gift of Stephanie H. Bernheim and Leonard H. Bernheim Jr. in honor of Gillett G. Griffin (2005-127).
Mysteries of the Maize God

Bryan R. Just

In 2005 the Princeton University Art Museum welcomed the gift of an exquisite Late Classic (A.D. 600–800) Maya vase from Stephanie H. Bernheim and Leonard H. Bernheim Jr. in honor of Gillett G. Griffin (cover, figs. 1, 12, 13). The vessel, intended for drinking chocolate, is masterfully painted, with sure, fluid lines effortlessly suggesting graceful motion and figural interaction and a keen sense of cylindrical composition, with figural groups and hieroglyphic texts paced according to what can be seen from a particular view. Moreover, it is in near pristine condition, with no restoration and no significant change in original coloration. The slip decoration makes balanced use of multiple colors, including orange tones, black-brown form outlines, and white accents. This palette and distinctive glyphic style is known from a number of extant vessels, all probably the work of a single city or region; as has been proposed recently, the style may be associated with El Zotz, a medium-sized center near the great ancient metropolis of Tikal in northern Guatemala. The use of two distinct calligraphic styles for the dedicatory rim text and narrative captions, the masterful figural rendering—imbuing figures with both a sense of mass and an effortless, subtle mobility—and a sophisticated narrative consisting of three linked figural compositions and rarely attested “quotative” inscriptions, all contribute to the exceptional character of this singular work of Maya art.

Despite excellent preservation and a relatively naturalistic, uncluttered rendition, the subject of the vessel has eluded interpretative interpretation. Various aspects of the inscription resist contextual interpretation, and the particular narrative presentation has no correlates in the known corpus of Maya art. Still, it is clear from certain iconographic details of the characters that the vessel depicts a key episode in the robust mythological saga of the Maya maize god—one of the most important and prominent deities in ancient Maya art. Given the novelty and complexity of this idiosyncratic vessel, this essay prefaces more detailed discussion of its subject matter with an introductory survey of the role of maize and the maize god in Maya art, drawing on examples from the Princeton University Art Museum’s superlative holdings of related material, several of which were also generously donated by the Bernheim family.

Today, the tortilla reigns as the dominant form of prepared maize throughout Mexico and northern Central America. Among the Late Classic Maya, however, virtually no evidence exists to indicate maize was prepared in this form. Instead, the ancient Maya consumed maize primarily as ‘ul (atole), a gruel-like beverage, or as waaj (tamales), lumps of dough stuffed with meat or other fillings and drizzled with sauce. Although standard dedicatory texts on cylinder vessels prove chocolate (kakau) was the most common intended beverage, some vessels include texts specifying they were for ‘ul, including an incised, lidded vessel that is a promised bequest to the Princeton University Art Museum from the collection of Gillett G. Griffin. In addition to hieroglyphic references, food is also portrayed in a number of courtly scenes on Maya vessels. On a drinking vessel from Tikal in the collection, for example, a tripod plate heaped with sauce-glazed tamales rests beside a cup of frothy chocolate just beneath a seated lord (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Cylinder vase with palace scene, detail of seated lord with tamale plate and chocolate cup. Maya, Tikal, Petén, Guatemala. Late Classic, A.D. 600–800. Ceramic with polychrome slip, h. 28.0 cm., diam. 14.6 cm. Gift of Mary O’Boyle English in honor of Woodruff J. English and the Class of 1931 (Y1986–94).
More commonly, maize appears in ancient Mesoamerican art in personified form, whereby the plant assumes the animacy and agency of a deity. Such representations first appear in Olmec art during the Early Preclassic period (1200–900 B.C.). As demonstrated by murals recently discovered at San Bartolo, Guatemala, early Maya depictions of the anthropomorphic maize god derived from Olmec visual conventions, implementing a distinctly Olmec style of facial rendition to distinguish this character from mortals and other deities. By the Late Classic period, however, Maya artists had developed not only their own conventions for depicting maize in its personified form but a rich mythological biography for the deity as well, several moments of which enjoy frequent illustration. Most images of the Maya maize god situate him at key stages in the botanical cycle of sowing, maturation, and harvest. Additionally, at regularly paced intervals Maya kings donned lavish costumes associating themselves with the maize god and their ritual actions with future agricultural fecundity. A particularly elaborate version of maize-god costume is rendered on so-called Holmul Dancer pots, which are affiliated with scribal workshops at Naranjo and the vicinity (fig. 3). Such vessels present lords dressed as the maize god, dancing with immense backracks and accompanied by dwarfs. Presumably, such vessels were produced for and used on occasions when lords performed just such ritual dances. Maya lords associated themselves with the maize god not only for agricultural ceremonies, but also to suggest that dynastic power recurred as if botanically inevitable; just as agriculture follows a recurring cycle of life, death, and renewal, the Maya held that dynastic power flowed from interred ancestors to their progeny, as demonstrated by maize-related tomb iconography, the generational recurrence of royal names, and the use of the term “sprout” (ch’ok) as a title for young princes.

Although these themes permeate much of Maya visual culture, they find their most frequent and elaborate presentation on finely painted ceramic vessels. This is no surprise, since such vessels, including cylindrical drinking cups, bowls, and tripod plates, were used in elite feasts to serve various forms of maize as well as chocolate, a comestible mythically related to maize. These same vessels were often placed in royal tombs, where they not only symbolically contained eternal sustenance, but also foretold the underworld travails and eventual victory over death the interred would experience through progenic renewal. Both cylinder vessels for liquids and plates for tamales were involved in these varied uses and often portray the maize god.

Maize-god plates, such as this fine example also from Tikal (fig. 4), most frequently present the deity in a gracefully active pose with one heel raised slightly—a conventional Maya posture indicating dance. The maize god is readily identifiable in such scenes by his elongated head, tonsured hairdo, and flowing feather adornments. The Maya believed all people were made from maize, and their bodily aesthetics reiterated this basic connection. Cranial modification (of still-soft infantile skulls), prosthetic nose enhancements, hairdos and headdresses, face paint and jade dental inlays all served to make Maya nobility resemble a thriving maize plant and particularly the single well-formed cob that typically grows near the top of the stalk; the elongated human head mimics the ear; long, thin strands of hair frame the head as if silk surrounding the healthy cob; and jade adornments and iridescent blue-green quetzal plumes symbolize the verdant leaves of the growing plant.
On this plate, the long, flowing strokes of the figure’s defining lines and the placement of feathers both on the head and at the joints enhance the sense of facile movement akin to the rustling leaves of the maize plant in the field. The innermost of the concentric framing bands on the plate consists of four patterned zones; although on many other Tikal Dancer plates these zones are marked with jaguar pelage—presumably a general reference to the power and prestige of the owner—the decoration here more closely resembles the rows of kernels on the maize ear or possibly the faceted pattern of a turtle carapace, a Maya symbol of the earth, from which all plants emerge with the coming of the spring rains. The outermost band presents a pair of repeating glyphlike elements that frequently appear on Tikal Dancer plates. Although they do not follow standard conventions of Maya hieroglyphic writing, Erik Boot has suggested they may serve as a formalized, pseudo-glyphic reference to the name of the maize god.14

Some plates made in the same Tikal style depict only the decapitated head of the maize god, alluding to the harvested
The decapitated head may seem a marked contrast to the youthful, energetically mobile dancing figure more typical of Tikal-style plates. Yet together, they mark two interlocking moments in the life cycle of maize: vital youth (ripe maize) and violent death (harvested maize). Both types may also have been used in burial contexts.

At some cities, tripod plates have been found, occasionally with small “kill holes” at their centers, inverted over the heads of royal individuals in their tombs, presumably equating the individual with harvested maize. With the “planting” of the deceased individual, the life cycle is renewed botanically; new life (progeny) will spring forth just as “dead” maize seeds sprout anew.

A few plates render explicitly this process of new life emerging from the dead head/body, including a fine example at the Princeton University Art Museum (fig. 6). The maize god, with his tonsured hairdo and long quetzal-feather headdress, dances atop a skull at the center of the composition. The skull—now largely eroded—represents a “decapitated,”
Figure 7a, b. Tobacco flask in the form of God N with turtle carapace (front [a] and back [b]). Maya, Nakbe or vicinity, Petén, Guatemala. Late Classic, a.d. 650–730. Ceramic with cream and black slip; h. 8.1 cm., w. 6.0 cm. Promised bequest of Gillett G. Griffin (L. 1987.43).

desiccated seed. From the skull flow curling red scrolls, representing blood or fire, as well as undulating plant stems capped by large, white water-lily blossoms. Water lilies, as well as the white heron with a freshly caught fish in its beak and the red band and stacks of black rectilinear forms at the bottom of the composition, all reference still bodies of water. For the ancient Maya, whose sophisticated agricultural technology included use of artificially raised fields in low-lying, swampy areas, such watery iconography alludes both to the field and to the underworld from which the maize god emerges as a new plant. On the plate illustrated in figure 6, two figures flank the dancing maize god, one with a snail-shell torso and the other with a crocodilian headdress. The former is an underworld deity known among scholars as God N, an old Atlantean character associated with mountains and thunder. In other instances, such as the “codex-style”
tobacco flask illustrated in figure 7a, b, God N wears a turtle carapace in lieu of a snail shell.

The character with the crocodilian headdress lacks definitive attributes of a particular deity, although Madeline Carroll has suggested he is a manifestation of Chahk, the rain and lightning deity who appears with some frequency in scenes with God N and the maize god.16 Alternatively, the headdress may identify this character as some aspect of the crocodilian earth, known as Zipacna in the colonial Quiché document the Popol Vuh and, in the Late Classic period, possibly as Itsam Kab Ayiin.17 Collectively, this crocodilian deity and God N may serve as primordial progenitors and agriculturalists and allude specifically to the coming of spring rains; thunder and lightning are thought to result from the forceful axing of the turtle-carapace earth, thus catalyzing the emergence of planted crops by cracking open the parched earth and quenching the seeds within with rain.

Although it is not clear whether the character with the crocodilian headdress on this plate is Chahk, this important rain god is frequently credited with splitting open the earth in order to facilitate maize growth, as exemplified by an early Maya fuchsite sculpture (fig. 8a). Chahk, identifiable by the swirling incisions of his eyes and his scalloped eyebrows, holds a lightning (k’awiil) axe behind his back, cocked and ready to strike. On his scalp appears the cross-shaped k’an (ripe) logograph mentioned previously, and cascading down the back of the head are scroll emanations indicating new plant growth (fig. 8b).20 Although the head-dress-wearing character on the plate illustrated in figure 6 does not wield Chahk’s lightning axe, his and God N’s gestures, pointing at the intersection of the skull-seed and the dancing maize god, indicate their agentive role in agricultural renewal.

In other versions of this scene, the maize god emerges from a crack in a turtle carapace, an explicit reference to the dry soil awaiting the onset of the rainy season.21 A finely modeled, Middle Preclassic (ca. 600–400 B.C.) Maya ceramic head at Princeton similarly references this theme (fig. 9a, b). The expressive human face is at once youthful and dead, the latter indicated by the flowing blood-scrolls from his neck, marking his decapitation. The raised ridges at the top of the head and the incised pattern on the back refer to a turtle carapace (fig. 9b; compare to fig. 7a, b). The pairing of carapace and severed head—situating the maize within the turtle-earth—strongly suggests the maize god was the intended subject and effectively alludes to the moment prior to his sprouting.22 Notably, this carapace is not decorated in the usual faceted design of a turtle shell, as can be seen on the small tobacco-flask illustrated in figure 7b, but with an incised checkerboard pattern. The same patterning envelops most of the surface of a Chocholá-style Maya drinking cup (fig. 10a, b) probably intended for the consumption of ‘ul, which also presents the rebirth of the maize god (note his tonsured hair and the curl on his head) from a dry, cracked seed, here rendered as the glyph ajaw (“lord”). Karl Taube
noted that this checkered pattern indicates cultivated earth in art at Teotihuacan and other central Mexican sites, and has suggested that it may serve a comparable iconographic function in this case. Alternatively, the checkerboard design may represent a basket weave; baskets were used to hold all kinds of materials, including, as rendered on several Maya vessels, the decapitated head of the maize god. The same basketry techniques were implemented throughout Mesoamerica to create large packs for transporting loads of small organic substances, such as maize kernels and chocolate beans. The potential association of the turtle’s shell with such packs is discussed below.

While the plates and related objects mentioned above present the most frequently depicted episodes of the maize-god saga (vital youth, harvest, renewal), many other moments are also attested in Maya art. According to a narrative sequence proposed by Michel Quenon and Geneviève Le Fort, the maize-god cycle includes at least five episodes: Following (1) harvest (death), the maize god is (2) transported into the underworld via canoe, where he is (3) reborn from the mouth of a fish with saurian features. Quenon and Le Fort argue the maize god is next (4) adorned in his regalia, in anticipation of his (5) resurrection into the terrestrial realm though the cracked turtle carapace/earth.

Of these additional episodes, only the “dressing” scene is represented in the Princeton University Art Museum’s collections (fig. 11). This brightly polychromed cylinder vessel, produced at an unknown workshop located between the Salinas and Candelaria rivers in eastern Mexico or north-western Guatemala, depicts the maize god flanked by two naked women, each holding an obsidian mirror shown in profile view. Only the upper half of the maize god is shown; the broad black band below marks a dark, watery context, at the center of which—and directly beneath the maize god—appears another skull, the upper portion here resembling a shell in cross section or the curled maize motif noted on the head of the decapitated maize god illustrated in figure 5. Although shown fully grown, the partial rendition of the maize god may indicate a particularly young plant; perhaps the sexual overtones of the naked women (rarely seen in Maya art, and consistently in sexually charged contexts) refer to the period of pollination, when pollen from the tassel at the top of maize plants may be seen to “adorn” the silk of the nascent ears. If that is the case, the fourth character on the vessel, identifiable by his black spots as the Hero Twin Hun Ajaw (also known as Hunahpu, which he is called in the PopolVuh), may refer to cross-pollination, as he leaves the scene with a bundle (of pollen?) and a staff or torch. Alternatively, the Maya also likened the sowing process (penetrating the soil with a planting stick and inseminating the earth with seed) to coitus; perhaps the overt sexuality of the scene refers to this process. In accord with

Figure 10a, b. Carved vessel depicting birth of maize god (front [a] and back [b] views). Maya, Chocholá or vicinity, Yucatán or Campeche, Mexico. Late Classic, A.D. 600–900. Ceramic with traces of red pigment, h. 12.3 cm., diam. 13.0 cm. Promised bequest of Gillett G. Griffin (L.1974.16).
Moreover, maize Quenon. This Guatemala. vessel’s difficult hand.27

The presence in this scene of Hun Ajaw—a son of the maize god—reminds us that Maya mythology need not follow strict chronology; such temporal liberties and the tendency to represent stories in *pars pro toto* fashion, with one or a few moments standing for an entire saga, make it difficult to determine whether this “dressing” scene was understood to have occurred after the maize god’s emergence from the earth, as postulated here, or before, as proposed by Quenon and La Fort.

Similar issues of sequence and narrative order confound study of the complex drinking vessel mentioned at the outset of this essay, to which we will now return our attention (see figs. 1, 12, 13). Among the various figures on this vessel appear three individuals sporting the maize god’s diagnostic tonsured hairdo: a diminutive figure straddling a plate on a backpack (fig. 1, right); a youth resting calmly in a cloth wrapping (Spanish: *rebozo*) on the back of a woman (fig. 13, left); and a full-grown man with the diagnostic maize curl on his head who stands, arms crossed, looking over his shoulder (fig. 12, left). The sequence from left to right of consecutively larger, more “mature” manifestations of the maize god, each of whom faces the viewer’s right, follows the standard reading order of Maya hieroglyphs, including that of the dedication text on the vessel’s rim.28

This sequence led Catherine Burdick to argue that the vessel’s subject is the maturation of the maize god, presented in a linear, chronological fashion.29 Some Maya vessels, however, involve a right-to-left unfolding of narrative time; the Princeton Vase is an excellent case in point.30 Moreover, Maya composition is consistently driven by a hierarchical sequencing of characters, in which the most powerful or important individual appears at the viewer’s right and is often seated, facing the rest of the scene. The fact that all three maize-god manifestations on this vessel look at the seated figure on the far right (see cover), even though in two instances the bodies are directed the other way, indicates such a hierarchy likely directed the composition of this vessel. Although some aspects of the narrative scene on this vessel are not yet fully understood, the story seems to unfold in a right-to-left sequence. As such, the following discussion will begin with the most prominent character at the viewer’s right.

The first figural grouping consists of three characters (fig. 12): an aged, paunchy deity who sits on a cushioned, jaguar-pelt throne; a diminutive character who holds two birds—an upraised macaw or parrot and a long-tailed quetzal; and the maize god, whose head turns to look over his shoulder at the seated deity. Each of the two columns of text placed between the characters describes speech, beginning with a version of the verb “to say.” The first, on the viewer’s left, quotes the speech as stating “It is good.”31 The second text column specifies the identity of the seated deity and confirms he is an interlocutor in the conversation, reading “He said it,” followed by two logographic head signs that reference two well-known Maya deities, God N and the Principal Bird Deity.32 The pairing of these titles, as well as the presence of the Principal Bird Deity’s tasseled *ak'ab* (“dark”) diadem on the clearly aged individual, comprises an example of what Simon Martin recently has termed “theosynthesis” and serves to clarify what we see here is a particular variant of the Principal Bird Deity, specifically in his anthropomorphic, aged aspect.33 This old man, known as God D by scholars, is a preeminent Maya deity, renowned for his wisdom and power as a sorcerer. His primary position in the...
composition and his active gesture seem to indicate his agency in the following events, yet the laconic inscriptions give no clue as to his precise role.

The identity of the diminutive character is also elusive, again due to the brevity of the caption glyphs. The red-and-white headband he sports is worn exclusively by the Hero Twins, however, and thus we may see here a youthful Hun Ajaw, who appears fully grown at the far left of the vessel composition. It is extremely rare to see Hun Ajaw as a child, and the rationale for such a presentation is unknown.

The body language of all three characters, so evocatively indicated by the fluid form lines, affirms their involvement in discussion, yet the particular gestures and bodily attitudes are difficult to interpret. Is God D’s gesture toward the upraised parrot/macaw meant to indicate he has selected it over the quetzal? If so, what does this imply? God D and the maize god seem to be looking intently at each other; does this indicate God D’s interaction has implications for the maize god, or that they share some agency in the ensuing actions? What exactly is the role of the adolescent Hun Ajaw? Although these questions remain unresolved, the orientation of the maize god’s body, which faces away from God D, seems to suggest that action results from the encounter, leading the maize god to turn away and directing the viewer to turn the vessel and continue the story along with him.

As does the first, the second scene on the vessel involves
three characters (fig. 12): a male character with a zoomorphic (deer?) headress seated on a monstrous head (symbolic of stone or, more generally, the earth), who makes a gesture of lament with his right hand; an amply proportioned adult female, who sits on the ground line; and, resting comfortably in a cloth wrap, an infantile male with the tonsured hairdo of the maize god (the attention of the full-grown maize god is directed away from this figural group, rendering him peripheral to this scene). The columns of hieroglyphs represent the speech of the adults; this is confirmed by the swirling lines, each connecting a column to the mouth of an adult. The woman’s text lacks a standard initial quotative verb (perhaps because the speech-line suffices in this instance), opening instead with the expression ba’iiy (ba-’i-y(a)), for which no clear translation is currently known. The following two glyph blocks—a-pibal (a-pi-/ba-l(i))—seem to read “your oven.” This curious passage may have two simultaneous meanings. First, given the central role of the maize god on this vessel, the passage may refer to the baking of tamales in a pit oven. Additionally, “oven” is also used metaphorically to reference the womb; in this sense, the passage may indicate that the woman is pregnant with the nascent maize god. The use of the second person possessive in the phrase presumably indicates that the man she faces is responsible for the pregnancy. Although it is difficult to decipher fully, the man’s speech seems to affirm this double meaning, as it can be interpreted to refer to “the maize within the seed” and thus possibly his progeny within the woman’s womb.
Throughout Mesoamerica, notions of birth and death are closely related; among the Mexica (Aztec), for example, earth goddesses frequently fuse deathly symbolism and birthing postures.\textsuperscript{17} In this challenging scene, we may be seeing both processes expressed in union; the maize god is both destroyed (cooked in an oven; mourned by the male), and reborn (the infant maize god; the allusion to the womb, possibly corroborated by the notable girth of the woman). Moreover, numerous ethnographic sources from throughout Mesoamerica note that the maize god was conceived by a couple out of wedlock; in many of these stories, the newborn maize god is killed (frequently by drowning) to hide the parents’ transgression.\textsuperscript{18} Perhaps the clear expression of lament by the man refers to such a sacrifice of his unborn progeny. In several of these stories, the infant maize god is rescued by a turtle “foster mother,” an event that is likely represented by the third and final scene on the vessel.

This scene includes the Hero Twin Hun Ajaw facing a scaly character carrying an immense pack loaded with a conical walking hat, an attached gourd and necked jar, and a plate, upon which sits a tiny, tonsured maize god (fig. 1). The inscriptions here provide only basic labels; the single glyph near the head of the man simply identifies him as Hun Ajaw (as do the spots on his body and his red-and-white headband),\textsuperscript{19} while the glyphs between him and the zoomorphic porter note that “his/her burden was immense” (pih yikats [PIH/yi-ka/-ts(i)-(tsi)]).

The animal in this scene has been identified previously as a toad.\textsuperscript{20} The notably sharp point at the tip of the creature’s upper lip, however, suggests it is a turtle, as does the witz (mountain/earth) face on its back, since the turtle is symbolically likened to the earth’s surface. Extending the turtle designation, we may understand the pack the turtle carries—its “immense burden”—to refer to a carapace. Such an interpretation lends rationale to the tiny maize god riding in a plate on the pack; he may serve as an iconic label for the contents of the pack, and by extension for the maize within the (turtle) earth. Although there are no known cognate ancient Maya texts or images, this presentation is similar to several documented Mesoamerican maize-god myths, wherein the discarded bastard maize-god child is rescued on the back of a turtle.\textsuperscript{21} Problematic, however, is the turtle’s loincloth, which suggests he is male, whereas the ethnographically documented turtle that served as the maize god’s foster parent is consistently female.

This unique scene also may explain how the turtle got his shell; the burden of carrying the maize god overwhelmed and compressed the turtle, forcing him to walk on all fours, near (and akin to) the earth. Perhaps specifically to accentuate the weight of this load, a large stone rests atop the zoomorph’s head. Hun Ajaw’s hand rests on the stone; perhaps it has been placed here by him. The stone thus may indicate some agency in the transformation to Hun Ajaw, and also suggests that we are witnessing the moment of earth’s formation; as the turtle is compressed by his important burden, he becomes the compacted turtle-earth.\textsuperscript{22}

To summarize, this vessel presents a unique version of the (re)birth of maize, involving the interdiction or direction of the preeminent old Maya deity God D. He seems to advise the actions of both the maize god and the adolescent Hun Ajaw; the former is to be consumed in the belly (oven) of a woman, presumably discarded by the parents, and subsequently rescued by a turtle, with the latter’s load ultimately becoming a turtle shell and thus the earth. This interpretation may explain the presence of woven patterning on the decapitated head with turtle carapace (see fig. 9a, b) and the Chocholá vessel (see fig. 10a, b), as they may reference the turtle’s pack before it became a hard shell.

As with any great work of art, this vessel retains many a mystery. Who, for example, are the male and female characters in the central scene? If the woman is indeed meant to be pregnant with the maize god, who sits on her back (his twin brother, perhaps)? What exactly is implied by the paired parrot/macaw and quetzal birds held aloft by the adolescent Hun Ajaw? Thinking beyond the iconography, we may also ponder for whom the vessel was made and for what occasion; what religious activities and/or political intrigues may have occurred while the vessel was being used to serve chocolate? Alternatively, the vessel’s thematic focus on life, death, and renewal may indicate it was made specifically for ritual interment with a recently deceased noble. If this were the case, who commissioned the painting? These and other mysteries of the maize god await the discovery of new, related iconography and further development in Maya epigraphy. This fine vessel certainly has much to contribute to such research in the years ahead.
Several people have proven instrumental in the development of this essay. Victoria Bricker, Donald Hales, David Hixson, Stephen Houston, Lily Just, Justin Kerr, and Karl Taube all provided pertinent insights on the subject and constructive comments on early drafts. I thank Simon Martin for sharing his most important unpublished document on “The Old Man” and also thank Stephanie Bernheim for her interest in this research, her enduring passion for ancient American art, and her commitment to the Princeton University Art Museum. Any errors of fact or interpretation remain the responsibility of the author.

1. This vessel is referenced at K7727 in Justin Kerr’s photographic Maya Vase Database at www.mayavase.com (hereafter Maya Vase Database), and MS208 in the neutron activation analysis database of Dorie Reents-Budet and Ronald Bishop.


3. Dorie Reents-Budet notes chemical similarities among the El Zotz–style vessels and ceramics of Uaxactún and Tikal, Guatemala (e-mail communication to author, July 30, 2008).

4. For the most extensive previous discussion of the vessel, see Catherine Burdick, “Notes on K7727,” published online at www.mayavase.com/7727.html (n.d.; accessed November 24, 2009).


19. Curiously, this complex motif also seems to incorporate a macaw’s head, the eye indicated by a dotted circle marking the white area lacking feathers. This bird appears to have a skeletal lower mandible, possibly identifying the character as an Early Classic variant of the bird deity Vucub Caquix, known from the Popol Vuh. If this reading is correct, the defeat of this important deity may here be linked to the creation of maize.

20. The best-known example of this scene is a codex-style plate in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1993.1663; K189 in Maya Vase Database).

21. Another fusion of maize-god head and turtle carapace is attested on an Olmec carved jade from Las Encruciadas, Tabasco, Mexico; Karl A. Taube, e-mail communication to author, March 10, 2009. See also Karl A. Taube, Olmec Art at Dumbarton Oaks, Pre-Columbian Art at Dumbarton Oaks 2 (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2004), 91 and fig. 404.


23. See, for example, K1183 and K1468, Maya vase Database.

28. The dedicatory inscription is a standard form, beginning just above the head of Hun Ajaw (far left on cover rollout). It reads: “Here it is, it is raised up! the surface-painted, thin-walled, drinking cup for ‘tree-fresh’ chocolate, /alay tabi yich uts’iltlínajal(h) niyaj yik’ib ta tshi te’l kolaw (a-LAY-y(a) TAB(?)-ji-yy(a) yis-ch(i)-u-ets-i-b(i) -IL(?)-NAJ-A [u]-ijaj yu’k’i-b(i) ta-TsIH te-T’E’li(e) KAKAW(?)

29. Burdick, “Notes on K7727.”

30. The Princeton Vase (91975-17) presents, at the left of the composition, the old underworld God I. seated on his throne in the midst of five distractingly beautiful young women. One of the women taps another on the heel and turns her head, telling both her companion and the viewer to turn the vessel in a counter-clockwise direction to reveal a scene in which the Hero Twins decapitate another underworld denizen. The folly of God I. (in not realizing the severity of the event on the other side of the vessel) is realized only when the vessel is read in this direction.

31. This passage reads, “He said, ‘it is good with the lord?/grandfather(?), it is good,’ /alitit us tuaw ajaw(?)/mam(?) uts (a-AL-[ji]-y(a) / u-ts(i) / [AJAW?/MAM?] / u-t(s)i).” On the possible reading of the bird head as /mams/, a term meaning both “grandfather” and “grandson,” see Simon Martin, “Caracol Altar 21 Revisited: More Data on Double Bird and Tikal’s Wars of the Mid-Sixth Century,” The PARI Journal 6, no. 1 (2005); 8; Alexandre Tokovinine and Vilma Fialko, “Stela 45 of Naranjo and the Early Classic Lords of Sa’al,” The PARI Journal 7, no. 4 (2007): 11.

32. y-aliitit /GOD N] itsam (ya-la-ji-[y(a)]/[GOD N[ /ITSAM). On this reading, see Martin, “Old Man of the Maya Universe,” 10; and Erik Boot, “At the Court of Itzam Nah Yax Kokaj Mut: Preliminary Iconographic and Epigraphic Analysis of a Late Classic Vessel” (October 30, 2008), 17, published online at www.mayavase.com/God-D-Court-Vessel.pdf (accessed November 29, 2009).


35. I thank Victoria Bricker (e-mail communication to author, January 24, 2009), for her advice on this decipherment.

36. aliitit ti nal?(?) walaw [seed?] hiin (a-AL-[ji]-y(a) / ti-NAL?/Maize?)-l(a)/wa-la-wa/hi-[na]). On the reading of the ajaw head-glyph as “seed,” see Taube, “Classic Maya Maize God,” 178–80; and Simon Martin, Cacao in Ancient Maya Religion,” 158–59. The final expression in this phrase, hiin, has recently been proposed to serve as an emphatic first-person reference, possibly stressing that the child within the womb is his. See Kerry Hull, Michael D. Carrasco, and Robert Wald, “The First-Person Singular Independent Pronoun in Classic Ch’olan,” mesow 31, no. 2 (April 2009): 16–43. 40 n. 5. In the other rare appearances of this independent pronoun, however, it is foregrounded (lefted) and thus appears at the beginning of a passage, not the end.


39. hun ajaw (HUN-A]-w(a)). It has been noted that the main sign of this collocation normally carries the phonetic value /pu/, leading to the alternative possible decipherment hunapun (HUN[y]-PU]-w(a)) (Burdick, “Notes on K7727”). However, this spelling of Hun Ajaw’s name, strikingly similar to the colonial Quiché version, Hunapu, is otherwise unattested in the Classic period. Stephen Houston (e-mail communication to author, August 1, 2008) suggested the /A/ reading for the element.

40. Burdick, “Notes on K7727;” David Stuart (“Kinship Terms in Maya Inscriptions,” in Martha J. Macri and Anabel Ford, eds., The Language of Maya Hieroglyphs [San Francisco, 1997], 9) more tentatively identified the character as a “reptilian creature.”

41. See Braakhuis, “Bitter Flour.”

42. Karl A. Taube, personal communication, August 28, 2009.