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# The Art of the Non-Royal Classic Maya: An Analysis of SAMA Object #72.42.109(19)

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**Pre-Columbian Art of Mesoamerica**

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## Introduction:

Imagine something as simple as your favorite coffee cup, that unassuming object can tell a story about who you. An old, small bowl can also tell a story but about the artists and people of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. The ancient Maya often placed offerings in the tombs of the dead as a way of providing for the deceased in the afterlife. One of the most common offerings was a ceramic vessel that contained special food or drinks. To better understand Classic period non-royal Maya ceramic vessels, this paper addresses a small clay-bowl (Vessel 19) in the off exhibit collection of the San Antonio Museum of Art (SAMA) Pre-Columbian Collection acquired in 1972 as part of a 19-piece assemblage (Accession #72.42.109[19]) (Fig. 1). The accession sheet provided by the museum states that the piece is a hand-built, black ceramic bowl that stands five inches tall with a diameter of 6 inches, and dates to between A.D. 600 to 700 (2015 File). Although, the piece was acquired without official provenience, SAMA suggests that the piece could be from anywhere in the Maya Region of Alta Verapaz to the Guatemalan Valley, which I do not dispute. Vessel 19 is an example of a Classic Maya vessel from the Guatemalan highlands, but it does not correspond to most examples of Maya ritual vessels from this region. As a monochrome slipped vessel, it can offer more insight into an area of Maya ceramics overlooked in favor of more elite objects.

**Figure 1**- Bey, Bridget. "Object 72.42.109(19)." 2015. JPEG.

In addition to their role as mortuary offerings, serving vessels were also an important part of daily ritual life and in Maya society, and thus one of the most prominent categories of Maya ceramic artifacts (Fry 1979:496; Rice 2009:149). As specialized, ritual containers, such vessels contained food and drink vital to religious ceremonies (Hall et al. 1990:140). I will argue that unlike many example of mortuary vessel that contained cacao based on previous examinations (Hall et. all 1990: 143), Vessel 19 most likely contained *atole* or another maize based food commodity based on the shape, size, and presence of the designs on the exterior of the vessel, which is also unlike their polychrome counterparts (Fig. 2) Finally, in this paper I will argue that Vessel 19 was a non-royal elite serving vessel, and although not an example of a royal serving vessel (see Fig. 2), the inscribed ik' symbols and the glyphs along its exterior rim point to its private or ritual importance although it defies some conventions.

**Figure 2-** Royal Polychrome serving vessel, with pictorial and hieroglyphic texts record a historical event taking place inside a palace. Contains an example of a PSS, which dedicates the vessel to a lord, describes the scene, and names the artist. (Reents-Budet 1994: 176).

## Stylistic Analysis: *Blackware*

All of Pre-Columbian North and South America, including the Maya, lacked the wheel and kiln in their pottery production (Rice 1987:21). Vessel 19 (see Fig. 1), with a diameter of

only 6 inches, is an example of a hand-built clay bowl fashioned without a wheel, and in this it is unlikely that a mold was used (2015 SAMA File). While molds were used in Mesoamerican ceramic production, the rapidity and uniformity permitted by the use of the pottery wheel is still not present in pre-contact Maya ceramics. There is also no archeological evidence that kilns were in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, instead they used "open firing, bonfire, or clamp method," a method that necessitates shorter firings with lower temperatures (Rice 1987:153). In open firing, whatever fuel is used (wood, grass, etc.) is placed in a pile and one or more ceramics are arranged with more fuel on top and sometimes inside the object; however, the ceramics are obviously not protected from contact with the fuel and often times affected by drafts in the firing process (Rice 1987: 155). For this reason, open firing is more temperamental than kiln firing and in general almost never used for glazed ware (Rice 1987:155). Because Vessel 19 is glossy, it might appear that there was some kind of glaze used; but instead it has a black-red slip, a watery-clay mixture brushed on right before firing, which has been polished to produce a medium luster (2015 SAMA File).

It is also an example of a blackware ceramic, a color not produced by the black-red slip, wherein a mixture of water and clay is applied to the outside of a vessel before firing to improve the smoothness of the vessel (George Bey, personal communication, January, 7, 2016). Blackware is created through a process called reduction firing or smudging (2015 File; Rice 1987:158). Near the completion of the open firing, the pile comprised of fuel and ceramics is covered with a fine material such as powdered manure or saw dust, which cuts off the oxygen supply to the ceramic so that the surface and pores absorb the carbon produced by the burning of this new fuel source (Rice 1987:158). This technique, wherein manure is added when the fire has reached its maximum heat and left until cool, is still used in Santa Clara, New Mexico (Fig. 3)

and Oaxaca, Mexico (Fig. 4) to produce their famous blackware (Rice 1987:158). Blackware, like Vessel 19, may also have slip placed upon them, which is then polished but not painted; the black or grey color of the ceramic is meant to be one of the primary visual elements. This added step further complicates the already variable production process of open firing, and whether or not there is a correlation blackware is much less common form of ceramic production in ancient Mesoamerica (Rice 2009:122; Reents-Budet 1994:2).

**Figure 3-** Santa Clara Carved Blackware Bowl made in 1960 New Mexico by Barbarita Naranjo. Part of the Arizona State Museum's Saving Southwest Traditions collection at the University of Arizona. <http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/exhibits/pproj/potqtvr.php?cn=79-87-14&sfx=&vr=0>.

**Figure 4-** Large Oaxacan Blackware vase at the State Museum of Popular Art of Oaxaca. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Museo_Estatal_de_Arte_Popular_de_Oaxaca#/media/File:LgCantaroMEAPO1.JPG>

***Incising Ceramic Vessels:***

Dorie Reents-Budet explains in *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period* that among the Classic Maya "painting was the primary expressive aesthetic" (1994:2). Although she is referencing all forms of artistic creation, in the case of ceramic production, polychrome vessels, ceramics painted with multiple colors, were the primary earthenware produced by the Maya (see fig. 2). Thus, Vessel 19 is fairly unusual in that it is a blackware-incised vessel; there is no evidence that is has ever been painted and its ornamentation consists of a series six of incised rim glyphs and a punctate design around the body of the vessel (Fig. 5). To the Pre-Columbian Maya, the single word *tz'ib* was used to describe both painting and writing, indicating how these concepts overlapped in Maya society (Coe and Stone 2005:13).

However, the Maya *did* distinguish between the scribe who used a brush pen, *aj tz'ib*, and the scribe that carved or incised the images, *yu-bat-lu* (Fig 6) (Coe and Kerr 1997:90). Both *aj tz'ib* and *yu-bat-lu* refer to a scribe-artist, but within Maya society the existence of the two words indicates that they perceived a separation between painters and carvers. And although there is no indication that there was any difference in social status between these two types of artists, according to Michael Coe and Justin Kerr, ceramic incising or carving, which they say would have been the responsibility of the same individuals, "required less technological know-how than painting with a brush" (1997:141). Furthermore, regardless of the medium on which the glyphic text is inscribed, stone or ceramic, Classic Mayan hieroglyphics are based on a calligraphic style emanating from the brush pen (Coe and Kerr 1997:145; Calvin 2006:45). These aesthetic trends and the more complicated firing process of blackware may explain they smaller presence of this type within the Maya ceramic record.

**Figure 5-** Bey, Bridget. "Object 72.42.109(19)." 2015. JPEG.

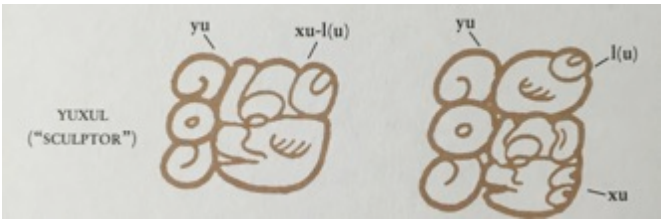


**Figure 6-** Scribal title *yuxul* meaning "carver."(Coe and Kerr 1997:90)

***Comparative Examples:***

Figures 7 and 8 are examples of incised Maya blackware vessels from Yucatán, Mexico. Although these two objects do not originate from Guatemala, they show (like Vessel 19) that an artistic tradition of incised blackware with incised hieroglyphs existed among the ancient Maya.

The beautifully incised lines that mimic a calligraphic style on the vase in figure 7, which is aesthetically comparable to the polychrome vase in figure 2, obviously required a high level of artistic skill and precision. Noble families owned the vases in figure 2 and 7, which shows that elite Maya still desired incised blackware even though polychrome is more common. Figures 7 and 8, when compared, also show that this artistic tradition crosses class or skill lines. A far less skilled or educated artist completed the vase in Figure 8, but the vases in both figures 7 and 8 depict the maize god, contain a hieroglyphic text, and were used as ritual serving vessels (Coe and Kerr 1997:204). Although, Vessel 19 is a bowl, and not a vase like these two examples, it was made with the same aesthetic principles, and possibly for the same practical purpose.

**Figure 7- (Left image)** Carved and incised Maya vessel from northwestern Yucatan, containing a long count date and an image of a young maize god holding a pen. It also contains text indicating the noble owner of the vessel and contained chocolate (Coe and Kerr 1997:204).

**Figure 8- (Right image)** Carved and incised Maya vessel created by an less skilled artist. Main image is of a maize god and between the two blue bands is the PSS (Coe and Kerr 1997:205).

## Serving Vessels

To understand how Vessel 19 fits into this archeological record as an incised black-ware vessel, it is also necessary to understand how it would have been used. The economic arrangement of ceramic production in Maya society is part of this understanding. Unlike artisans today who specialize in ceramics, this was often not the case in ancient Mesoamerica. As has

already been stated, the artists who inscribe or carved ceramic vessel were also probably the artists who carved stone objects, monuments, or buildings, which fits into the "fundamental lowland Maya strategy of productive diversification" (Rice 2009:141). Prudence Rice explains that while the Maya did have a certain level of agricultural surplus to allow for an artisan class, product diversification minimized economic risk in a harsh environment plagued by possible political or agricultural problems (2009:141). As has also been stated, open firing posed its own risk, and firing as the most risky part of production meant that all investments in time, labor, and material could be lost in a single firing mistake (Rice 2009:121). This meant that to best minimize their economic risk, each Maya artist produced many types of ceramics to ensure the completion of any (Fry 1979:509).

However, "no unequivocally identified pottery workshops have been discovered in the Maya Lowlands," which obscures possible assessment of the role of pottery production and trade (Fry 1979:495). Even without this knowledge, however, based on the established method of product diversification and the assembly of other Classic Maya goods, archeologists have determined that even within larger sites ceramic production was small in scale with horizontal organization (Fry 1979:510; Rice 2009:149). In other words, ceramic production was a cottage industry not controlled or monitored by the state, and production arrangements probably varied depending on the types of ceramics (whether it was polychrome, unslipped, blackware, content and shape, or had text) being produced by each artist or group of artists in a certain workshop. The most common pottery found for the ancient Maya are cooking and serving vessel for food and drinks, which were used for gifts, display, funerary offerings, and rituals (Fry 1979:496; Rice 2009:117).

As a bowl with both symbolic designs and glyphic text, both of which will be addressed later in the paper, Vessel 19 most likely fits into the category of serving vessel; especially based on interior marks of the bowl denoting use (Fig. 9). Prudence Rice hypothesizes that monochrome-slipped wares, like Vessel 19, were created in non-royal households in the periphery, and were then brought to palaces to have texts placed on them (Rice 2009:140-1). While the punctate design on Vessel 19 is covered by the slip, there is not slip within the grooves of the glyphs indicating they were carved after firing (see Fig. 5). This may show that the bowl was molded with the punctate design and fired by an artist and then taken to another artist for the addition of the glyphs, supporting Rice's claim.

**Figure 9**- Bey, Bridget. "Object 72.42.109(19)." 2015. JPEG.

***Maya Exchange of Serving Vessels:***

Looking at the exchange of serving vessels at the ancient Maya site of Tikal, Robert E. Fry makes the point that geography, what local resources are available, influences the production practices of a certain site and can help explain technological variability (Fry 1979:505). Certain styles of ceramics can be concentrated in a particular area or site but pop up in different parts of a region, how these clusters of different styles are situated and overlap on a landscape can offer insight into the differences between Classic ceramics in the Maya region. Yet, Fry notes that in

the lowland Maya region, where Objects 19 derives, there is homogeneity of raw materials, leading to high levels of stylistic similarity in serving vessels, especially in the Classic Period (1979:500). Furthermore, small, monochrome-slipped bowls and basins, like Vessel 19, are extremely portable, come in a wide range of sizes, and hence have a wider zone of distribution originating form an established and important trade system (Fry 1979:496).

This trade system evolved in tandem with the complex political system of the Classic Period. The Maya Civilization, especially in the Classic Period, was characterized by a hierarchal centralized political system. This system is based on a ritual economy of elite feasting and periodic markets embedded in a calendrical structure of rotating geopolitical capitals (Rice 2009:149). However, ritual service wares had more significance then simply containing food for ritual feasting, as Reents-Budet puts it, "was employed as social currency in the realm of ritual regal gifts (1994:2). Serving vessels were distributed and gifted during potlatches, a ceremonial feast to display wealth, or other rituals on important dates within the calendrical system, and the act of giving or receiving the vessel symbolized the creation of a socially political relationship. Receiving such a vessel placed the owner within a certain sector of society. Unsurprisingly, Fry also explains that larger, wealthier houses have more pottery of all classes and greater access to the "finest polychrome serving vessels" (1979:496). As a non-polychrome vessel, it is unlikely a royal household owned Vessel 19 based on the glyphic evidence, but possible that is was owned by non-royal elites. Polychrome vessels painted with mythological or historical scenes and text entailed not only a high level of artistic skill, but also historical and cultural knowledge (Rice 2009:122). While Vessel 19 is decorated with a visually simple design and only a few "glyphs," the central symbolism of the punctate design and social implications of the glyphs demonstrate a deep understanding of Maya culture and mythology. And to own such a vessel represents a social

status and “a category of inalienable wealth that constituted an important part of statecraft,” meaning the owner had a certain amount of disposable income reflecting their elite position (Rice 2009:149). High social status requires certain political and social behaviors to maintain that distinction, one of which is the purchasing of artistic, ritual objects that represent and often physically portray the political ideology of the state. The value of the object comes from the ownership that symbolically represents relationships with both elite-knowledge and the edifying power structure. Based on its uniformity and technical precision as a blackware-serving vessel, I argue that a non-royal elite household with disposable wealth likely owned Vessel 19.

***Understanding Vessel 19: How was it Used?***

Unfortunately because SAMA acquired the piece in 1972 before the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, Vessel 19’s provenience is unknown. However, I propose as a possible explanation that it was a funerary object that contained a maize-based food or drink. Serving vessels are the most common type of pottery found in a funerary context, and were often repurposed or made exclusively as a mortuary offering (Fry 1979:496). Before SAMA acquired Vessel 19, it had been broken into 15 separate pieces and repaired (it was then restored by the Museum again in 1984); it is unlikely that it was thrown into the fill of a building or a midden deposit, as the pieces still remained in close proximity and relatively intact (2015 SAMA File). Because it was most likely obtained outside of an archeological context, such as looting, it is more likely that looters found the object in a burial context already broken and haphazardly repaired it for resale.

Serving Vessels, such as Vessel 19, found in a burial context often contained food and beverages, which most scholars think were meant to sustain the deceased in the next world (Hall et al. 1990:140). In 1990, Grant D. Hall and his colleagues were the first to chemically test the contents of such mortuary offerings from ancient Mesoamerica. They were able to prove that

four of the five vessels they tested contained cacao (1990:142). They then discussed the idea of Maya serving vessels as "specialized commodity containers," because the glyph for cacao found on some of these vessels demonstrated the clear connection to its content (Hall et al. 1990:139). The presence of hieroglyphic text along the rim of a vessel is an archaic Maya tradition marking ownership of a valued object known as a Primary Standard Sequence or P.S.S., and the P.S.S. normally what the object is suppose to contain (Stuart 2005:7). The glyphs on Vessel 19 are not able to allude to its possible context, but the punctate design around the body of the bowl, as I will explain in the next section, demonstrates connection to the Maya Maize God similar to the glyphs found on Hall's examples. David Stuart explains that the glyph for the maize-based drink *atole*, while not as common as the glyph for cacao, appears on serving vessel within the Maya Courts (2005:31). The presence of the atole glyph in the Mayan language demonstrates that it was a ritually significant beverage. Most importantly, Stuart says that "Without exception, atole vessels are shallow bowls, either rounded or with flat bottoms" (2005:31). Compared to the example of an atole vessel provided by Stuart (Fig. 10), while Vessel 19 is slightly smaller and rounder, it has a flat bottom and is relatively shallow, which fits the criteria for an atole vessel.

**Figure 10**- Example of an atole vessel (Stuart 2005: 31)

## Ik' Symbolism

Besides the rim glyphs, the punctate design around the body of Vessel 19 is the main decorative element, a decoration that supports the idea that it contained a maize product. The

perforated areas, probably created using a thumbnail, appear three times around the vessel, and each area forms a half cross (see Fig. 11). The negative space between the punctate designs also creates a half cross (Fig. 12). I believe that these half-crosses are a depiction of the *ik'* sign (Fig. 13), which was used by the Classic period Maya to mark precious objects or ritual paraphernalia (Guernsey 2010:81). Taking on the same symbolism and meaning, the *ik'* motif developed as a partial quatrefoil (Fig. 14), a symmetrical shape consisting of four lobes at right angles from a common center. The quatrefoil in Maya iconography in its simplest sense represented a cave (Fig. 15), and caves were seen as portals to the underworld and the supernatural (Guernsey 2010:78). The ancient Maya saw caves as living beings that breathed; and by the end of the Late Pre-Classic, the *ik'* motif specifically symbolized wind and breath (Guernsey 2010:80).

**Figure 11**- Bey, Bridget. "Object 72.42.109(19)." 2015. JPEG.

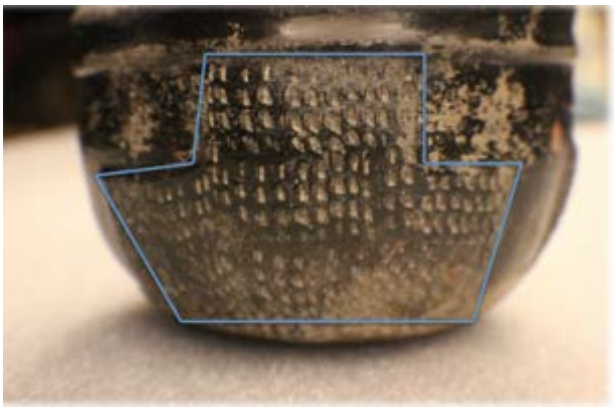

**Figure 12**- Bey, Bridget. "Object 72.42.109(19)." 2015. JPEG.

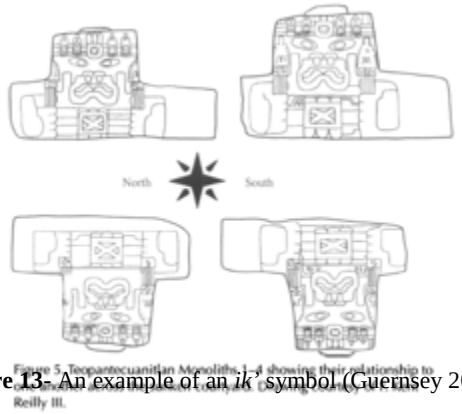


**Figure 13**- An example of an *ik'* symbol (Guernsey 2010: 80).

**Figure 14**- Basic quatrefoil form (Guernsey 2010: 77)

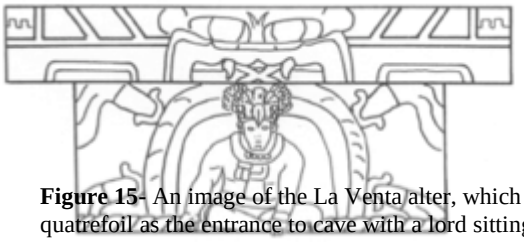

**Figure 15**- An image of the La Venta alter, which shows a quatrefoil as the entrance to cave with a lord sitting in the mouth between the two worlds (Guernsey 2010: 76).

It also became associated with floral forms in death expressions, "as if death were expressed as a final exhalation" (Guernsey 2010:80). The highly spiritual symbolism of the *ik'* sign, further attests to Vessel 19's possible ritual use. Moreover, the quatrefoil represented a portal to the Maya underworld, a watery realm, meaning the cave opening also represented a water source. As a serving bowl, Vessel 19 can create a pool of water, symbolically acting as a portal to the underworld and death (Guernsey 2010:78). A relationship also developed between the *ik'* sign and the Maya glyph *yax*, which connoted agricultural abundance and the arrival of rain; accordingly, the *ik'* motif related to notions of fertility and the creation narrative of the Maize God (Guernsey 2010:82, 90). For the Maya, the Maize God symbolized creation and survival, and since maize was the primary source of food for the Maya, it is not illogical to draw a further connection between maize and the *ik'* sign. As stated in the last section, although the glyphs on Vessel 19 do not define the contents of the object the way a P.S.S. might, the symbolic connection between the *ik'* motif and the Maize God, and thus corn as well, supports the supposition that Vessel 19 held a maize-based food or beverage conceivably used ritually.

## Glyphs: *Mayan as a Written Language*

The glyphs that appear on Vessel 19 are part of a long and complicated tradition of writing in ancient Mesoamerica and translation in modern archaeology. Michael Coe, a leader in the translation and understanding of the Mayan language, explains that while Mayan may have begun as vernacular, eventually "Classic Mayan" evolved into a mainly written language (2005:15). The earliest estimated date for Vessel 19, A.D. 600, still places it solidly in the Classic Period that extends from A.D. 300 to 900, which means that the text around the rim would have been written in a different language from the dialect spoken in Guatemala at that time (2015 File). Mayan is a polysynthetic language and many signs are polyvalent, meaning a word will have a root stem with grammatical affixes and can express a complete sentence, but

the same sign can also have more than one semantic or phonetic reading (Coe and Stone 2005:16; Calvin 2006:43). For example the Mayan glyph *balam,* meaning jaguar or jaguar head, can be written phonetically as ba'la'm(a), pictographically as a jaguar head, or a combination of both (Fig. 16), but each form of *balam* contains different connotations despite the equivalent definition. The complexity of Mayan glyphs necessitates a rigid writing system regulating how these glyphs can be combined to create meaning. Despite the logistical complexity of the language, no more than 400 signs were ever in circulation within a region as one time (Calvin 2006:44). As I previously pointed out, Maya writing is calligraphic; this aesthetic uniformity visually expresses the consistent form of Maya hieroglyphic texts notwithstanding the medium or method of the writing (Calvin 2006:41). David Stuart makes the point that, "the rapid progress in the decipherment in the 1980s and early 1990s was driven by the detailed analysis of repetitious and highly formulaic pottery texts," a progress pioneered by Michael Coe (2005:3). Even though it assumed that most examples of Maya texts have not survived, the grammatical rigidity of the language, for all the fluidity of glyphic semantics, made translation possible.

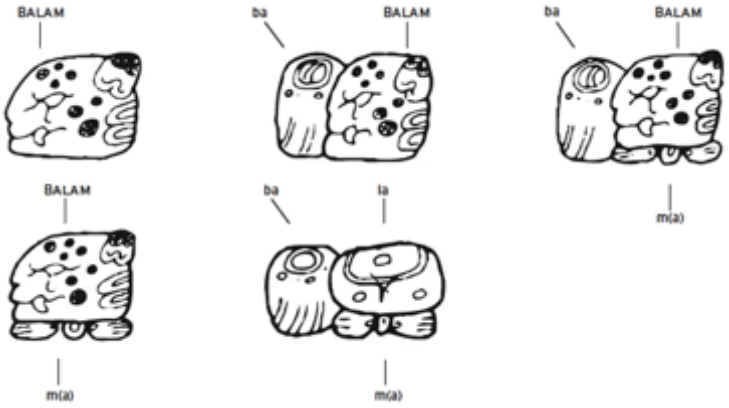


**Fig. 16**- Examples of the Mayan glyph Balam (Coe and Kerr 1997:54)

Through the text that has survived on ceramics, certain formulaic texts appeared over and over on ceramic vessels and were identified as essentially name-tags. Just at the *ik'* sign was used to mark valued objects, eventually in the 1980s these name-tags were understood to be a

very old dedicatory tradition in Maya writing by the Classic Period (Stuart 2005: 7). It is possible that the dedicatory formulae, which will be explained in the next section, was the first use of written Maya (alongside Calendrical glyphs) and came long before the narrative and historical writings (Stuart 2005: 9). The Maya were the only New World culture known to have signed their artistic or literary works, which Michael Coe sees as "a testimony to the high sophistication of the culture" (1997: 90). These texts designated object as important, and while much of that importance derived from symbolic meaning tied to the life of the object, the fact that pieces of art were used as symbolic and political capital indeed testifies to the prominence of art and writing within Maya culture.

***Primary Standard Sequence:***

Many instances of the dedicatory formulae are examples of what Michael Coe first called the Primary Standard Sequence (PSS). Before Coe's discovery and subsequent scholarship on the PSS, many scholars saw the hieroglyphic texts on Maya ceramic vessels as either decorative borders or "senseless mistakes in dates" created by illiterate, peasant artists (Rice 2009:123; Coe and Stone 2005:98). However, the PSS is a highly formulaic script that occupies a prominent position on the vessel encircling the rim of the vase or bowl, exactly the location of the glyphs on Vessel 19 (Coe and Stone 2005:98-99). The PSS reads from left-to-right (as one can see in the written title for carver (see. fig. 6) and consists of between twelve and three glyph-block, yet the information provided by these glyphs always appears in the same order (Calvin 2006:41; Coe and Stone 2005:99,106). The PSS does not explain the scene or symbols below the text, but gives information about the object itself in a very specific order: first is to whom the vessel is dedicated or symbolically offered, second is who owns it and the name of the scribe, third is the shape of the vessel, and finally the contents of the vessel (Coe and Stone 2005: 98-100). Legitimate texts on Maya ceramics appear in very specific locations on the object, and the PSS is

always along the rim of the vessel (Calvin 2006: 46). Vessel 19 consists of three sets of two glyph-blocks each (Fig. 17, 18, 19) that appear along the rim (see fig. 6). The number of glyphs and location of these glyphs fits the criteria for the PSS, and yet the glyphs on Vessel 19 are not a legitimate example of a PSS.

**Figure 17- Glyph Set 1**
Bey, Bridget. "Object 72.42.109(19)." 2015. JPEG.

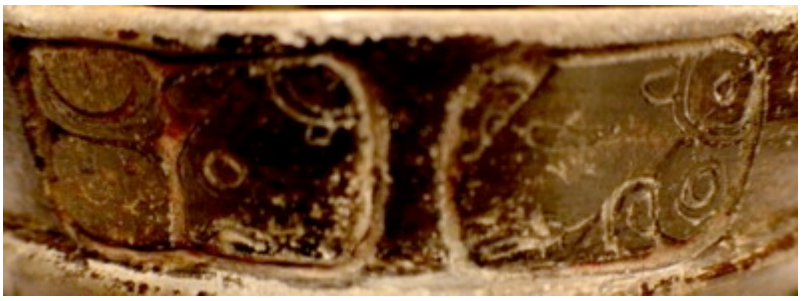

**Figure 18- Glyph Set 2**
Bey, Bridget. "Object 72.42.109(19)." 2015. JPEG.

**Figure 19- Glyph Set 3**
Bey, Bridget. "Object 72.42.109(19)." 2015. JPEG.

## Pseudo-Glyphs:

I have shown that Vessel 19 is a well-made blackware bowl decorated with the symbolically significant *ik'* sign and hieroglyphic text, which together suggest a high-status artist and owner presumably with access to elite-knowledge. However, the glyphs on Vessel 19 are pseudo-glyphs and only imitate the appearance of Maya hieroglyphs. According to Marc Zender, a Mayan hieroglyphic specialist, the glyphs are "definitely inspired, in a few cases, by actual

Maya signs in the PSS, but intermingled with some outright inventions" (personal communication, November 5, 2015). Many pseudo-glyphs are part of a mixed system that combines unique, mock glyphic elements or entirely false glyphs with true Mayan, although not used correctly (Calvin 2006:189). Zander rationalizes that the glyphs on Vessel 19 "at only 6 glyph-blocks in length, any bona fide PSS would be fairly predictable," but no elements of the PSS "seem obviously present here; a good indication of a pseudoglyphic text" (personal communication, November 5, 2015). Because the PSS is so formulaic and identifiable, one must question the validly of a PSS example if certain elements are not present or are out of order. While it is possible that some legitimate regional or dialectic glyphic elements appear in the pseudo-glyphs on Vessel 19, of the six total glyphs (Fig. 20-25), none are examples of grammatically authentic Maya glyphs. Vessel 19 also fits the profile for other such bowls with pseudo-glyphs. Based on a comprehensive analysis of 121 Maya vessels with pseudo-glyphs from Guatemala, it seems that most pseudo-glyphs appear on small bowls, which likely held corn-based food or beverage (Calvin 2006:3, 201). This evidence further supports my claim that Vessel 19, as a small bowl with pseudo-glyphs, was meant to contain a maize-based food or beverage, like atole. Taken together it also supports the claim that Vessel 19's glyphs are not real script but illiterate imitation.

**Figure 20- Block 1A**

**Figure 21- Block 1B**

**Figure 22- Block 2A**

**Figure 23- Block 2B**

**Figure 24- Block 3A**

**Figure 25- Block 3B**

***Comparison to Real Glyphs:***

Experts at SAMA attempted to translate the glyphs on Vessel 19, but understandably could only make a few possible glyph suggestions, such as the "rabbit" glyph, of which there is no resemblance on Vessel 19 (2015 File). However, SAMA's attempt shows that these glyphs are not observably fake, because they are good imitations. To parrot Marc Zender, Vessel 19's artist seems "definitely inspired" by real glyphs, although not necessarily inspired by examples of the PSS because some of the most repetitive features of the PSS are not present. Glyph Set 1 (see fig.17) shows the most resemblance to real glyphs. According to Zender, Block 1A (see fig. 20) has two elements, the first is unique and the second seems inspired by "vulture" glyphs (Fig. 26) like AJAW (Fig. 27), AK' (Fig. 28), and MAM (Fig. 29) (personal communication, November 5, 2015). But the second part of Block 1A seems to have more human qualities, such as an ear-spool, and most closely resembles the last example of the AJAW glyph in figure 26. Nonetheless, 1A is still not a perfect copy, but Block 1B (see fig. 21) is actually a real glyph, the generic "bird" glyph (Fig. 30) (Marc Zender, personal communication, November 5, 2015). The inclusion of real Mayan next to a pseudo-glyph is probably a coincidence and the result of the extensive use and variations of the "bird" in Mayan. For example, besides specific types of birds like the "vulture" (see fig. 26) there are glyphs for "bird head" (Fig. 31) and "large-beaked bird" (Fig. 32). Even without knowing the semantics of the glyph, an artist would have likely seen enough variations on the bird glyph to recreate a similar image.

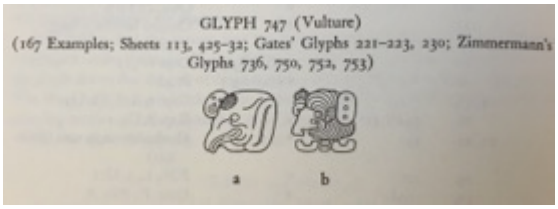


**Fig. 26-** Examples of the Maya glyph for vulture (Thompson 1962:330)

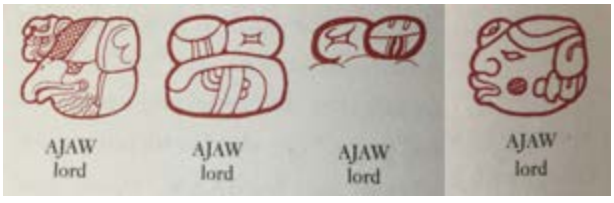


**Fig. 27-** Examples of the Maya lord glyph AJAW (Coe and Stone 2005:162)

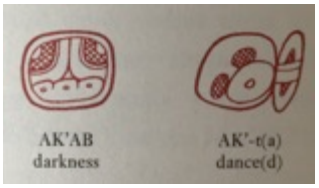


**Fig. 28-** Examples of the Maya glyph AK' with different affixes. AK'AB means darkness and AK'-t(a) means dance (Coe and Stone 2005:162).

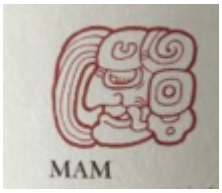


**Fig. 29-** Example of the Maya glyph MAM, which can mean grandfather (Coe and Stone 2005:164)

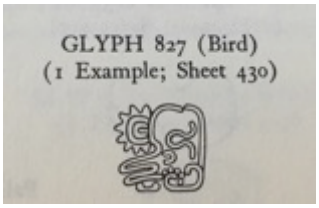


**Fig. 30-** Example of the basic Maya glyph for bird (Thompson 1962:376)

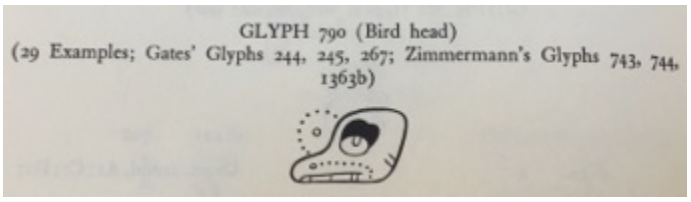


**Fig. 31-** Example of the Maya glyph for bird head (Thompson 1962:376)

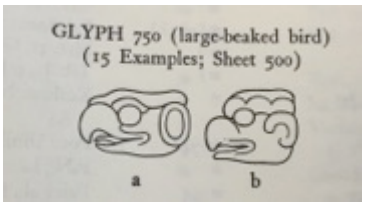


**Fig. 32-** Example of the Maya glyph for large-beaked bird (Thompson 1962:376)

Glyph Set 2 (see fig. 18) also contains signs similar to real Mayan affixes, yet not combined or placed correctly to create any discernable meaning. Zender comments that the first glyph-block in this set, Block 2A (see fig. 22), involves three signs "that all seem unique to this vessel, though the first of them seems similar in some respects to the 'jade celt' sign" (Fig. 33) (personal communication, November 5, 2015). He goes on to say that the placement of each element in the sign is "unfortunately of unknown reading" and "not common on vessel texts," indicating that any significance of the "jade" sign is extraneous (personal communication, November 5, 2015). Block 2A shows that the artist potentially knew enough about Mayan as polysynthetic language to realize that while some glyphs stand alone as an ideogram, certain ideas or information require the combination of multiple signs. Although that may be an overzealous postulation, we can definitively say that Blocks 2A and 1A, another combination glyph-block (see fig. 20), demonstrate that the artist at least understood that some glyphs were made of a single image and others were a combination of smaller images. Block 2B (see fig. 23), the second glyph-block in Glyph Set 2, seems to be an imitation of a single image hieroglyph or ideogram. It is an anthropomorphic portrait, which SAMA incorrectly identified as the "rabbit" glyph (2015 File). Seemingly inspired by AJAW (see. fig. 27), IX (Fig. 34) or XIB, Zender

observes that Block 2B lacks any "clear details that would firmly link it to any of these" potential options (personal communication, November 5, 2015). The inclusion of both types of glyphs in Glyph Set 2 shows the great extent the artist went to imitate the visual look of a hieroglyphic set.

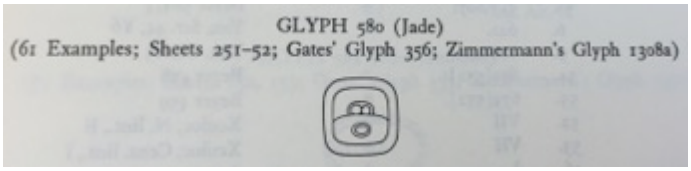


**Fig. 33-** Example of the Maya glyph for jade (Thompson 1962:205)

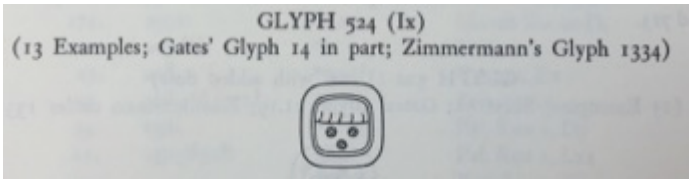


**Fig. 34-** Example of the Maya glyph IX (Thompson 1962:126)

Unfortunately, the third glyph set (see fig. 19) is almost too damaged to provide any salient details. The first of the set, Block 3A (see fig. 24), is cracked through the middle; one half is completely missing and the other is too marred and basic to identify any possible inspiration. Block 3B (see fig. 25) is almost entirely bare, but may be the remnants of another unidentified anthropomorphic portrait glyph; on the far right side of Block 3B, Zender identifies "a bit of an ear-spool assemblage and the upper part of an ear" (personal communication, November 5, 2015). The ear-spool in Block 3B is similar to what I previously indicated in lower right corner of Block 1A as potentially an ear-spool (see fig. 20). The similarities between these glyphs on Vessel 19 indicate an artistic continuity of pseudoglyphic elements, which implies that a single artist incised the glyph band with his or her own unique images. Inga E. Calvin's data showed that "only 24 of the 314 pseudo-glyphs were found on more that one vessel, and 12 appeared at more than a single site," and reveals that most pseudo-glyphs are the result of singular invention (2006:179). The artists responsible for pseudo-glyphs were all exposed to the same Mayan system of writing present on public buildings and monuments or other ceramics, but their imitations are just that, individual riffs on Mayan.

***Who Created the Pseudo-Glyphs?***

Based on the timeframe and museum documentation, I believe the pseudo-glyphs on Vessel 19 were added to the bowl at the same time it was created, and not a later modern addition. As previously discussed, Vessel 19 was broken at some point before arriving at SAMA, and in 1984 the museum hired a professional restorer to repair the object for potential exhibition (2015 File). Because SAMA conducted this restoration five years after the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 and documented it under the supervision of the museum board and the curator of the museum, it is unlikely that SAMA would allow the restorer to falsely repair an object already in their collection (2015 File). To convincingly fake even Maya pseudo-glyphs would require extensive knowledge of the PSS, which Michael Coe had only deciphered about ten years before the repair was completed. Finally, and I think most telling, is the fact that Glyph 3A (see fig. 24) and Glyph 3B (see fig. 25) are left almost entirely blank. If the modern restorer faked four glyphs on Vessel 19, there is no reason to think that he or she would not fake the last two, but these are left blank. The evidence weighs in favor of the idea that an ancient Maya artist created the pseudo-glyphs and the modern restorer could not recover the images in Glyphs 3A and 3B.

Pseudo-glyphs, although not real script, are part of the scriptural tradition that existed contrast to and as a result of the written language. They include a mix of real and fake images, suggesting a familiarity with the Maya writing system but not literacy, or at least not demonstrated literacy (Calvin 2006: 224). Nonetheless, one cannot assume that Maya scribes creating real text never wrote pseudo-glyphs. According to Inga E. Calvin, who conducted the pseudoglyphic analysis on the 121 vessels, “there is some evidence that scribes responsible for fully literate texts could also produce, on the same pot, rapid ‘design’ bands of pseudo-glyphs” (2006:224). This suggests the possibility of textual need or motivation behind the glyph inclusion

besides informationally tagging the object, motivations that I will explore later. The creation of the images whether or not there is any real meaning behind them still requires some artistic skill and at the very least a visual knowledge of Mayan. Glyph Block 1 (see fig. 17) on Vessel 19 demonstrates how the artist behind the pseudo-glyphs still needed a calligraphic hand to delicately carve the images with changing line thickness (Calvin 2006: 224). However, it is worth repeating that the artist does not need to understand Mayan or the PSS in order to copy the obvious visual pattern or appearance of certain glyphs.

***Social Reasons and Implications behind Pseudo-Glyphs:***

Initially, legitimate examples of the PSS were seen as meaningless decoration created by illiterate artists (Coe and Stone 2005:98). Now a laughable idea, we realize that examples of pseudoglyphic text found on ceramic serving vessels do indeed exist, and were possibly added by illiterate artists (though it is impossible to know if the Vessel 19's artist was actually illiterate). Nonetheless, the idea that pseudo-glyphs were only added as meaningless decoration, often to ritual serving vessels, naively discounts the underlying social significance of the PSS or written language in general. Pseudo-glyphs, such as those found on Vessel 19, appear exactly the same place as the PSS because they are meant to replicate the writing found on important ceramic vessels, either painted or incised (Calvin 2006:180). The actual information provided by the PSS may not have been as important to the artist or owner as simply the presence of "text" in the same place as a PSS (Aldana 2013:58). The presence of text on ceramics such as Vessel 19 insinuates that the social significance derives not from the meaning of the glyphs but on their placement around the rim, which would mark it as a valued or important object.

By the Classic Period, a separation existed between written Mayan and spoken Mayan. While many unique dialects existed throughout the Maya Kingdom, often within a very small area, the language of the Maya scribes, much like Latin today, remained basically unchanged for

over a thousand years; also like Latin today, scholars assume that literacy remained confined to "a very select few" (Coe and Stone 2005:14). The agricultural abundance of the Classic period allowed for the existence of artisans inside and outside of palaces, thus the flourishing of art and writing, and non-royal elite Maya did exist. This class of Maya-elite, like the royal families, had access to education and the leisure time to devote to that education, an unknown luxury for peasants working to survive. However, non-royal elite still made up a very small part of the population. Language differences and literacy exemplify the deep class lines within the social hierarchy of the Maya. The written Mayan language, as an exclusively elite form of knowledge, presumably led to language ideology (Houston et al. 2000:351). The idealization of the written word in Maya society would have then led to an increase in legitimate texts and a heightened visibility of script, and Stephen Houston suggests that the number of pseudo-glyphic texts correspondingly increased in the Late Classic period (2000:351). SAMA dated Vessel 19 to between A.D. 600 to 700, right in the middle of the Late Classic; accordingly Houston's observation corroborates SAMA's date for Vessel 19 because it is a pseudoglyphic ceramic.

The increase in hieroglyphic and pseudoglyphic texts in the Late Classic stemmed from scriptural idealization, but literacy itself meant more than the ability to read these texts, it represented elite knowledge. The possession of text symbolized a connection to wealth and the edifying power structure in the same way owning a ritual-serving vessel would, as previously examined. Acting as "low-cost simulations of wealth," Pseudo-glyphs give the effect of a high-status surface treatment without the needed experience or skill a real PSS requires (Coe and Stone 2005:14; Reents-Budet 1994:139). To own a vessel even with pseudo-glyphs superficially connect the owner to the his or her literate counterparts. Unsurprisingly, it has been noted that pseudo-glyphs appear on pottery produced by non-royal artisans (Houston et al. 2000:341). True

Mayan hieroglyphics undoubtedly marked the palace tradition of the PSS, while non-royal elite obtained lesser, though still exclusive vessels.

One cannot assume that the owners of pseudoglyphic objects, like Vessel 19, were illiterate. Objects embellished with text still possessed the symbolic importance of "writing." For example mortuary offering with pseudo-glyphs, of which I have shown Vessel 19 is likely an example, do not reflect the literacy of the person with whom they are buried (Calvin 2006:224). This shows that one cannot definitively say whether the artist or owner was literate or illiterate. The Late Classic period, during which the use pseudo-glyphs amplified, was also a time of social upheaval where potentially the desire for "text" outgrew the literacy of available artists (Calvin 2006:225). Social upheaval would create new secondary and tertiary lords, who would have been eager to accumulate all the material and symbolic possessions of that rank. Serving vessels with the PSS denoted both the wealth of the owner and their social connections; yet the creation of text requires more skill and potentially translation and interpretations if the consumer was illiterate (Houston et al. 225). Because the literate class was still comparatively small, it may not have been possible to meet this new demand and pseudo-glyphs provided an adequate substitute. The new lords of the Late Classic located far from the palace or large cities may not have even had any ability to create or commission a true PSS, but the semblance of text increased the commercial and symbolic value of a vessel within their auxiliary community (Reents-Budet 1994:141). I do not believe that the Late Classic Maya artists of pseudoglyphic object intended to fool a customer by passing it off as real text. The underlying importance of the PSS lay with its inclusion, the actual information provided was tedious and repetitive. The lack of information provided by Vessel 19's "text" does not completely limit our understanding of the object because it obviously meant to represent the PSS, and this tells us that it was a valued item.

## Conclusion:

Vessel 19 does not come from the Maya palace-tradition that produced the beautiful and famous polychrome vessel of ancient Mesoamerica (see fig. 2). It from a less illustrious tradition of incised blackware ceramics, which range from the visual simplify of Vessel 19 (see fig. 1) to the loveliness of the Royal Vase in Figure 8 and finally to the complex delicacy that characterizes the modern blackware of Oaxaca (see. fig. 5). SAMA acquired Vessel 19 without provenience, but it has remained essentially intact, which indicates that it was most likely looted from a tomb, a placement that would imply its status as a ritual-serving vessel. And although Vessel 19 defies some conventions of that characterize most ritual Maya serving vessels (it's monochrome, incised, and contains pseudo-glyphs), metaphorically dense symbols adorn its body. The *ik'* sign encompasses fundamental understanding of Maya mythology and points to the contents of the bowl, maize-based, while the pseudo-glyphs demonstrate an idealization of elite-knowledge and power. A royal artist may not have made Vessel 19, but it's designer blatantly tried to distinguish it as a valued object. The Classic period Maya used both the *ik'* sign, which covers the body of the bowl, and the pseudo-glyphs, which circle the rim, to mark precious objects or ritual paraphernalia. However, the placement of the large, obvious *ik'* symbol accompanied by only an imitation of hieroglyphic text could mean that Vessel 19 is simply a non-royal attempt at plagiarized artistry. Mariana Aldana reached the same point in her research on pseudo-glyphs but instead said, "The most parsimonious explanation is mimicry of some sort, but human nature has an inherent creativity that needs not be limited to a common node for evolution of cultural phenomena" (2013:58). I believe the simplicity and symmetry of Vessel 19 show the ardor of the artist in his work based on his skill, not mindless mimicry.

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