



# Glyph Dwellers

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## A Plate for the Naranjo Ruler K'ahk' "Skull" Chan Chahk

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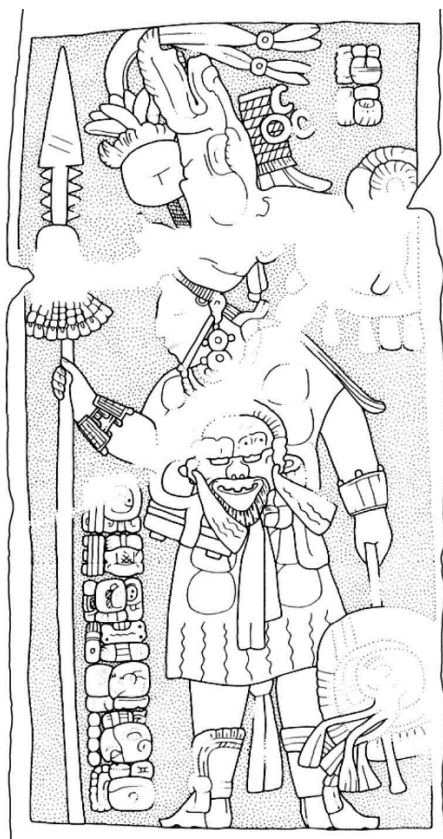
In a recent FLAAR report, Nicholas Hellmuth (2024) published a photo of a Maya plate with a well-preserved text and image (**Fig. 1**). As typical of many Late Classic-period plates, the text is painted around the interior just below the rim, separated by red lines from the image that adorns the bottom. The central motif depicts a human in dance pose and wearing a deer headdress, wristlets, sandals, loincloth, and a mostly eroded hipcloth. Dancers wearing deer headdresses appear elsewhere in ancient Maya art in diverse contexts and are still performed today (**Fig. 2, 3**; Looper 2019:100, 124–136). Because the text of the plate is a Primary Standard Sequence and therefore does not directly refer to the action depicted, the context of this dance, as well as the identity of the dancer, remain unclear.

The text of the plate is well-preserved and entirely legible. In terms of both style and content, the text closely matches but expands upon that of two vessels in the Schokoladenmuseum, Köln, (inv. no. 50058 and 50061) suggesting that these three vessels may have been part of a set (see **Table 1**). Because the inscriptions of the Schokoladenmuseum vessels have been discussed extensively in previous publications (Krempel and Davletshin 2011; Krempel, Matteo, and Davletshin 2017), this report focuses on the new content provided by the inscription on the plate, as well as its stylistic features. In this study, we refer to the Schokoladenmuseum vessels using the abbreviations SCM50058 and SCM50061.



**Fig. 1.** Plate, after Hellmuth (2024:31).





**Fig. 2.** El Kinel Mon. 1. Yaxchilan ruler performing period-ending dance wearing deer headdress, holding spear and fan (790 C.E.). Drawing by Stephen Houston.



**Fig. 3.** Figure wearing deer headdress and holding a rattle, suggestive of music and dance. Naj Tunich Drawing 71. Drawing by Andrea Stone.

The text of the plate begins with an Initial Sign in the form of a bird with an open mouth (BM4; block A). As discussed by Krempel et al. (2017:11), the more complete version of this sign, which includes a chick or small bird in the mouth, appears on SCM50061 and is probably a rebus logogram **AL**, used in place of *alay* 'here'.<sup>1</sup> The next seven blocks (blocks B-H) refer to the dedication of the painting (or decoration) of a drinking vessel for cacao. Like the Schokoladenmuseum vessels, the next three blocks (I-K) provide titles for the vessel's owner.

The proper name of the vessel owner is next in blocks L-N. On bowl SCM50058, this name is spread out over four blocks and has already been identified as that of the Naranjo ruler K'ahk' "Skull" Chan Chahk, a

<sup>1</sup> David Mora-Marín (2021), in contrast, argues that this BM4 sign does not substitute for the PSS Initial Sign, but rather should be read as the last sign in the PSS, representing **YAL**, for *y-aal* 'her child', an example of a truncated parentage expression. However, we note that the signs that occur immediately to the left of BM4 in the two Schokoladenmuseum vessels discussed in this note are themselves truncated, in comparison to the text of the plate presented here. If this were in fact **YAL** 'her child' following the name of the protagonist, an ellipsis would be required on the Schokoladenmuseum vessels, which seems unlikely to us. For more interpretations of the PSS Initial Sign, see (Mora-Marín 2023a; 2023b; 2024; MacLeod and Polyukhovych 2005).



king first identified on Naranjo Altar 2 by Nikolai Grube (2004:198, 208; Krempel and Davletshin 2011). The plate text, however, clarifies the data provided the bowl, in that the first part of the name is **K'AK'**, followed by the dotted skull **xi**, and the "arc-ing Kawak" **pi** (T177). In their study of SCM50058, Krempel et al. (2017) were unable to securely identify the final grapheme in this name, suggesting possible **wa** or **ja**. However, comparing block L on the plate with the corresponding block on SCM50058, the "arc" and "Kawak" of the **pi** grapheme are both apparent (see **Table 1**).

While this name is unique in the Maya corpus as far as we know, its structure is analogous to that of other elite names. Examples include K'ahk' Tihliw Chan Chahk, K'ahk' Ukalaw Chan Chahk, K'ahk' Hoplaj Chan Chahk, K'ahk' Yipiy Chan Chahk. In each case, the term following the term "*k'ahk*" is a verb, with various affixes (ROOT-Vw, ROOT-*laj*; and ROOT-*iy*) (Beliaev, Davletshin, and Vepretskii 2018; Colas 2004; Grube 2002; Houston and Stuart 1996; Lacadena García-Gallo 2004; Zender 2010). It follows that "*xip*" must also be a verbal root. A search in Mayan language dictionaries yields a couple of leads regarding the meaning of this term.<sup>2</sup> Yucatec has an entry for *xip* as 'comenzar un trabajo' (Barrera Vásquez, Bastarrachea Manzano, and Brito Sansores 1980:945), suggesting that a translation for the ruler's name might be 'Chahk who starts fire in the sky' or 'Chahk who sets the sky ablaze'. An alternative translation for this verbal root, suggested by Alex Tokovinine (pers. comm., 2024) is 'blow', based on Ch'ontal *xipän* 'sonar (nariz)' (Keller and Luciano G. 1997:288; see also Wichmann and Brown n.d.). Applying the meaning of this transitive verb, the ruler's name might be K'ahk' Xipiw Chan Chahk, or 'Chahk who blows/sneezes fire in the sky'. However, the lack of an affix such as **-wa** in the spelling of this royal name means that his name is not completely deciphered.

The plate text ends with two blocks that give the dynastic title for K'ahk' "Skull" Chan Chahk (blocks O-P). This is the *k'uhul sak chuwen* title carried by Naranjo rulers (see Martin 2020:74), an element that is absent in both of the Schokoladenmuseum vessel texts. This detail confirms the identity of the patron of the Schokoladenmuseum vessels, as suggested by previous researchers. The appearance of *k'uhul* 'holy' with *sak chuwen* is quite unusual, appearing elsewhere only on Naranjo Stela 14, block F3. To the right of the *sak chuwen* title on the plate is a set of five circles, which demarcates the end of the text from the beginning.

Some useful observations can also be made regarding the overall content and style of the plate's text. Stylistic and orthographic similarities abound between the plate and the Schokoladenmuseum vessels, but particularly with the vase SCM50061. In addition to the usage of the unusual "bird" form of the Initial Sign, all the signs on the plate are extremely similar in appearance to the vase, strongly suggesting that they were painted by the same artist. The main difference between the two is the presence of an infixed **ba** sign on SCM50061, which is absent from the plate. The bowl (SCM50058) might also have been by the same hand, but there are also significant differences. It is also interesting that the plate's text refers to it as a 'drinking vessel for cacao', which is unlikely to have been its actual function.<sup>3</sup> It is possible, therefore, that the inscription of the plate (as well as that of SCM50061) was copied from a missing "original" text. This is also suggested by the abrupt truncation of the SCM50061 inscription, to make it fit within the

<sup>2</sup> Ch'ol has the adverb *xip*, referring to objects wrapped in papers or feathers, probably a loan from Nahuatl (see Aulie, W. de Aulie, and Scharfe de Stairs 1998:115). However, this doesn't work well within the context of the grammar of the personal name in question.













<sup>3</sup> Plates labeled as *yuk'ib* 'drinking vessels' are not uncommon, appearing in various styles. They include K5073, K5723, K8479, LC.p2.158, Museo Popol Vuh 0449, Musée du Quai Branly 70.2001.36.1, and a plate in a private collection (Tunesi and Lopes 2004).





















confines of the vessel rim, as well as the marginally pseudoglyphic rendering of various signs, especially **ch'o** in block J and both **SAK** and **CHUWEN** in block P of the plate. One wonders if these vessels were even manufactured in the vicinity of Naranjo or if they were made somewhere else, perhaps significantly later than the reign of K'ahk' "Skull" Chan Chahk, for commemorative purposes.

In conclusion, the text of this plate is closely related to SCM50058 and SCM50061, two vessels in the Schokoladenmuseum. All three vessels were probably part of a "set" of dishes made at the same time and in the same workshop. It is particularly similar to SCM50061, probably painted by the same artist. It is stated to have been owned by the Naranjo ruler K'ahk' "Skull" Chan Chahk (or possibly K'ahk' Xipiw Chan Chahk), uniquely providing his *k'uhul sak chuwen* dynastic title.












**Table 1.** Comparison of texts from plate published by Hellmuth (2024) [Column 1]; Vase, Schokoladenmuseum 50061 [Col. 2]; Bowl, Schokoladenmuseum 50058 [Col. 3 (reordered)]. Column 1 drawing by M. Looer; Columns 2 and 3 drawings by Guido Krempel (after Krempel, Matteo and Davletshin 2017:figs. 2, 4).

|  |   |   |             |                 |                  |
|--|---|---|-------------|-----------------|------------------|
| <br>A   |    |    | (a)-AL-(ya) | alay            | here             |
| <br>B |  |  | T'AB?(-yi)- | t'abaayich<br>? | is<br>dedicated? |
| <br>C |  |  | -yi-chi     | "               | "                |
| <br>D |  |  | u-          | utz'ihbal       | its painting     |




|   |   |   |             |        |                     |
|---|---|---|-------------|--------|---------------------|
|    |    |    | -tz'i(-ba)- | "      | "                   |
| E   |   |   |             |        |                     |
|    |    |    | -li         | "      | "                   |
| F   |   |   |             |        |                     |
|    |    |    | yu-k'i-bi   | yuk'ib | his drinking vessel |
| G   |   |   |             |        |                     |
|  |  |  | ka          | kakaw  | cacao               |
| H   |   |   |             |        |                     |
|  |  |  | CHAK        | chak   | great               |
| I   |   |   |             |        |                     |
|  |  |  | ch'o        | ch'ok  | sprout/<br>youth    |
| J   |   |   |             |        |                     |



|   |   |   |             |              |                |
|---|---|---|-------------|--------------|----------------|
|    |  |    | KELEM       | kele'm       | young male     |
| K   |   |   |             |              |                |
|    |   |    | K'AK' xi-pi | k'ahk' xipiw | K'ahk' "Skull" |
| L   |   |    |             |              |                |
|   |   |   | CHAN-na     | chan         | Chan           |
| M   |   |   |             |              |                |
|  |   |  | CHAK        | chahk        | Chahk          |
| N   |   |   |             |              |                |
|  |   |   | K'UH        | k'uhul       | holy           |
| O   |   |   |             |              |                |



|  |  |  |                       |               |                            |
|--|--|--|-----------------------|---------------|----------------------------|
| <br>p |  |  | <b>SAK<br/>CHUWEN</b> | sak<br>chuwen | Sak<br>Chuwen<br>[Naranjo] |
|--|--|--|-----------------------|---------------|----------------------------|

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