

Pseudo Glyphs on Gouged and Incised Late Classic Lowland Maya Vases



Chapter 1 for multi chapter Presentation:
Que tal si los pseudoglifos en cada region maya son un dialect regional?

Nicholas Hellmuth

conferencia Presencial

Jueves 26 de febrero 2026, 7:00 pm

Edificio del Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquin

Chapter 1: Pseudo Glyphs on Gouged and Incised Late Classic Lowland Maya Vases

Chapter 2: Pseudo Glyphs on Chama & Related Styles of Late Classic Highland Maya Vases

Chapter 3: Pseudo Glyphs on Catfish Red Style & Related Styles of Late Classic Lowland Maya Vases

**Chapter 4: Maya Pseudo Glyphs and Rare PSSequence Dedicatory Formula
on Red Band Tepeu 1 Style Round Bottom Edge Vases**

**Chapter 5: Maya Pseudo Glyphs and “Pseudo Sky Bands”
Another “Regional Dialect” ?
Atypical Hieroglyphs
on Tepeu 3 (Terminal Classic) Mold Impressed Bowls and Vases**

**Final Chapter, Chapter 6:
Pseudo Glyphs on Vases, Bowls, and Plates from the Maya Lowlands**

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Introduction to interest in Maya Pseudo-Glyphs

Inga Calvin has dedicated many years of in-depth research on pseudo glyphs of Maya ceramics resulting in her monumental PhD dissertation (2006). My research is to locate additional examples of Maya vases with pseudo glyphs that are in the FLAAR Photo Archive, which was donated to Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University in 2024. Plus, to find digital rollouts by Hellmuth that have pseudo glyphs. These digital rollouts are in a separate FLAAR Digital Photo Archive (that was donated to Dumbarton Oaks in 2026). So all these previously unstudied pseudo glyphs will gradually become available to Calvin, her students and to other epigraphers, linguists, iconographers, and ceramicists around the world.

Most importantly, I wish to document that one cause of "illegible, and/or sloppy" pseudo glyphs can be documented fully from what I discovered in the Tomb of the Jade Jaguar, that I excavated in 1965. In my Harvard undergraduate BA thesis of 1967, I show how and why the scenes on a dozen of the vases in Tikal Bu. 196 (Str. 5D 73) were sketchy. So today is a year 2026 update to my research of 1965 1967. In those years I was more focused on iconography. Now, for recent years, I am also focused on epigraphy.

Since Calvin studied pseudo glyphs for many many years and has a corpus far larger than I do, I am showing primarily photos that I took in the 1970's 1990's and digital rollouts from 1998 onwards. I use my own informal categories that later can be merged with the classifications by Inga Calvin.



A rare example of two different gouged incised vases that both have several of the same pseudo glyphs, so potentially from the same atelier or at least the same region. Both are digital rollouts by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Digital Photo Archive, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University. We show the complete vase rollouts further into this presentation.



Another vase with totally different scene but the hieroglyphs look similar to those on the previous God N vase.

I will be publishing all these in English and in Spanish after the lecture, so all these glyphs can be available to epigraphers.



These God N portraits are better quality than on the preceding vase. But the hieroglyphs look “decorative”. That said, I still estimate that the scribe had a message. The artist that gouged and incised the two God N portraits knew precisely how to picture a really old grouchy God N (in his conch shell, like a hermit crab). Digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Digital Photo Archive, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University. Hellmuth 2024: Fig. 9 shows one panel. On the front cover of the same Hellmuth 2024 publication is another God N from the same identical atelier but in “blackware”.

One of the reasons why I wanted to accomplish rollouts at high digital resolution was so you could study how this God N was gouged and incised.



Repeated Hieroglyphs



Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquin, digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth. Are these symbols, or bizarre glyphs, or an inept scribe trying to show a message. Surely if the scribe designed this, there was symbolic meaning that clearly epigraphers, linguists and iconographers need to study, since I doubt they were “meaningless”.



Digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Digital Photo Archive, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.



Surely there are dozens, scores, of other vases with this style of rectangular panel and horizontal hieroglyphic band. These glyphs are not repeated—definitely not the style of PSSequence texts—but surely are a text that was intended to be read, or at least sending a message.

We show other gouged-and-incised vases from Tikal Burials 116 and 196 in Appendix A to the chapter on pseudo-glyphs in Peten style vases.



Repeated Head Glyphs

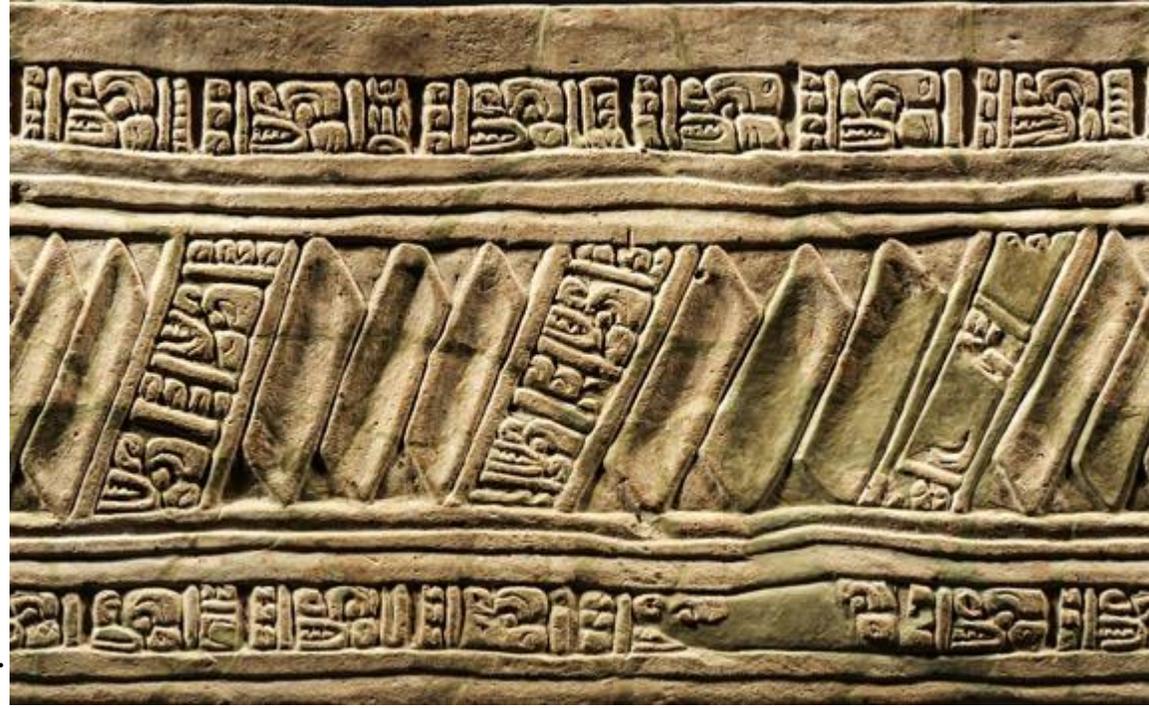
Every glyph, on both horizontal bands and the two preserved diagonal bands, has the identical head. But the “postfix” is different.

At the end of this PowerPoint we show the rollout camera equipment and the lighting. This was literally the most amazing digital rollout camera system ever produced (we also had two other rollout cameras including one from Seitz in Switzerland (not Leitz in Germany).



We appreciate the hospitality at Copan Ruinas, Honduras, for our visits there from the late 1960's through two photo sessions in 2024.

Digital rollout advantages: the Better Light software allows you to “measure” the circumference and then the software allows you to have the rollout at the precise width of the complete rollout. Hellmuth was the beta tester of the original Dicomed rollout camera (late 1990’s) and then the engineer at Better Light made improvements so this panorama camera could produce precise rollouts. Better Light then provided this new model to the FLAAR digital photo project. The lighting is Hellmuth’s personal style— not part of the camera software. We had a complete portable studio that we set up at Copan to accomplish this and other rollouts.



Kerr rollouts have helped scholars for generations and are the leading research resource for epigraphers and iconographers. This particular Kerr rollout is not yet in the Dumbarton Oaks database but the new scanned edition will surely include a good resolution scan.



These two rollouts are at the identical height, but since in the pre digital era there was no way to see the test rollout until the film was developed in a lab, the rollout speed (width) was with a tabulation. So the scene is stretched.

Normally we bring an entire portable photo studio: light stands to hold the lights, tripod to hold the camera, and backdrop paper (to hold the backdrop paper requires two light stands and a metal pole to run horizontally under the roll of paper). But since we needed to photograph in two museums on the same day we brought portable lights that were hand held and used an iPhone or Google Pixel on a tripod for such a phone. But cheap junk tripods could not even hold the “weight” of a telephone, so we will never use such “Made in Low-Bid-Land” again. Nonetheless, photographer David Arrivillaga was able to accomplish good views with lighting that is “Hellmuth/FLAAR cross-lighting style”.





These “hieroglyphs” are stylized bird heads. They are similar (same bird) but not identical (so not mold-impressed). Obviously needs a rollout to show the entire text, but our goal for the MPV UFM lecture was to show the corpus to encourage future research.



These bird heads are a great example to define what is a hieroglyph and what is a symbol or motif. Best for linguists and epigraphers to handle that. Nonetheless, the upper area of Maya vases and bowls and plates was intended to present a text for the viewer.



It would help if archaeologists could find what Maya sites have produced this same style.



Digital rollout by
Nicholas Hellmuth,
FLAAR Digital Photo
Archive, Dumbarton
Oaks, Trustees for
Harvard University.





I estimate that these three “texts” are all from the same atelier or same region. I estimate they may all be authentic, so Late Classic and not Post Plastic.

It would help if archaeologists could find what Maya sites have produced this same style.



Two different vases,
probably from same
area.



Repeated Pseudo Glyphs



A rare scene with the main personages facing right. Normally they would face left. The heads are not placed correctly but there was not space for a neck. The rest of the figures are not as out of proportion.

These are clearly pseudo glyphs.

Some of these gouged-and-incised vases may be Chipoc style, hence “Highland Maya” but for the chapter on Highland Maya we focus on polychrome painted and primarily “Chama orange” vases. Saravia, Garay and Saravia 2019 compare and contrast Highland Maya examples.

Incised Vase, Repeated Geometric Motifs instead of Hieroglyphs



Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquin. I love this cursive style to show the elongated stylized shape of these Maya faces. The row of geometric designs around the top could be considered simply as geometric designs, or as geometric pseudo glyphs because this area of Maya vases and bowls usually had a row of glyphs.



Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquin, digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Digital Photo Archive, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.

Simplified Repeated Hieroglyphs with lots of Empty Space with not many complex Infixes



This vase and the rollout of another vase on the following page are probably from the same atelier or at least the same area.

Since most iconographic research is on polychrome vases, plates and bowls, we don't study incised scenes as often.

The glyphs around the top are repeated but different, and the open circular areas are not well known elsewhere. Definitely need to find all the other sides of this vase to publish the entire scene.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Photo Archive, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.



Surely all these glyphs have meaning. So I would not write them off as pseudo glyphs.

Very interesting regional style.



Probably considered Pseudo Glyphs, because they are sloppy and several repeat, but crossed bands and 4 petalled flower motifs are found in Sky Bands and in texts. Surely an epigrapher can recognize the two wider “glyphs”. So this is presenting a message.



K9174

Kerr rollout, K9174



The arrangement of the panels, the background alternating from dark to light, the presence of God N in the dark panel and a man dancing in the other panel, plus two rows of “hieroglyphs” show that these two vases are clearly from the same area though not necessarily the same atelier—but clearly the same regional tradition.

Either the client or the artist was in such a hurry that they did not even attempt crude simplified Pseudo Glyphs. But they clearly realized that both bands were supposed to have a long hieroglyphic text.



Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquin. Digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Digital Photo Archive.
Potentially Chipoc Style

The God N is nicely rendered but many of the glyphs are repeated.





Two completely different regional styles of God N in his traditional conch shell.
Surely there are more in the Kerr database??

Helter Skelter Hieroglyphs



Splitter
splatter,
helter
skelter are
two ways to
describe
these
glyphs.

But surely
an
epigrapher
can make
linguistic
comments.



This is the most curious God N that I have ever seen on Late Classic Maya ceramic. Curious whether from Peten, Maya Highlands, or Yucatan Peninsula. Would be very helpful to find more scenes by this same atelier. They made the background very smooth. And the lightly incised glyphs are not common.

Repeated Hieroglyphs, but I would not automatically call these Pseudo Glyphs



Beautiful incised animal heads. Postfix over the head and “ear” glyph are repeated but not the lower glyph in the earring area. The two glyphs in the “empty” horizontal area each have identical prefix and postfix but main sign is not identical (other than in shape). Fundacion la Ruta Maya. Very professionally incised by this Maya craftsman. Museo Fundacion La Ruta Maya.

Repeated Geometric Glyphs



Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquin.



Repeated incised glyphs.



Pseudo Glyphs that are More Decorative than a Written Message?

I put a question mark on this concept because what may be viewed as “decoration” would normally have a “message” or definitely a meaning.

So pseudo glyphs need to be studied, in depth, by

- Iconographers
- Linguists
- Epigraphers

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Photo Archive, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.





Digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Digital Photo Archive, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.



I am curious whether both these brown vases are potentially from same atelier or at least same region.



Digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Digital Photo Archive, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.



Kerr rollout, K7010. Surely there are more, but pseudo glyph is not in the keywords of Maya Vase Database—would help to add that word as keyword to the Dumbarton Oaks database of improved resolution.

Probably not from traditional Peten atelier—need to find more from same atelier and where it was.



Some repeats but “readable” so not Pseudo Glyphs

Repeated Hieroglyphs, also simplified (without abundant details)

Once all the 35mm color slides and black and white contact sheets are scanned and cataloged by Dumbarton Oaks we should be able to find all the other sides of this pedestal based vase.

The face is a stylized God K, the same undulating upper lip as on the Tikal burial vases, but the style in this scene is from some totally different other area.

The hieroglyphs are repeated, simplified and would be considered as pseudo glyphs.





Horizontal text is simplified and repeated. But surely these glyphs carry a message.

Vertical text is not repeated.

So far, this is the only slide we have found of this vase but surely Dumbarton Oaks will find more.

The main personage is in a stylized conch shell, so probably a God N.

Surely this vase is in a museum. Once we find out we can credit that.





Gouged and incised Maya pseudo glyphs on a vase rescued by Neria Virginia Herrera Pinelo and therefore preserved in Guatemala, in the Museo Dr. Juan Antonio Valdes, iniciada por Doña Neria Virginia Herrera Pinelo, Uaxactun.

Photos by Bruce Love with excellent cross-lighting that allows you to see the details of the glyphs.

Love and Rubenstein 2023: pages 170 and 171.

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Love and Rubenstein 2023: pages 418 and 419.

17-2-1-539



418

17-2-1-539



419



Repeated Main Sign but the prefixes are not all identical and the upside down Ahau is not repeated. The size and shape of the two panels reminds me of the gouged incised vase from Tikal Bu. 116 and the series from Tikal Bu. 196, but clearly not the same scribe or the same message.



Summary and Concluding Reports about Maya Pseudo-Glyphs that are Carved or “Gouged-and-Incised”

Most studies of iconography are focused on polychrome painted ceramics, since I estimate over 95% of Tzakol basal flange bowls and 95% of Tepeu plates are decorated by painting. But in many Maya regions there are also lots of gouged-and-incised scenes on vases and bowls (and on cache vessels). So it helps to introduce the corpus of gouged-and-incised vases and bowls that have glyphs that are either:

Simplified

Simplified and repeated

Decorative rather than with linguistic main sign and affixes

Are widely spaced

Are a text other than a Primary Standard Sequence (PSS) dedicatory formula

Nowadays most of these “glyphs” are dumped into a generic category of Pseudo-Glyphs. I suggest that most of them need to be reclassified, because most are clearly “sending a message that the Maya could “read””.

What is needed is another PhD dissertation, but coordinated with an epigrapher and linguist(s) so that new categories can be established, and new “readings” can be suggested. The multiple chapters in this presentation by Hellmuth are a result of the request by epigrapher Camilo Luin, curator of the MPV, UFM. For a PhD dissertation an even larger corpus is needed, such as from the Kerr database:

Samples of Pseudo Glyphs from Kerr rollouts:

K5168, incised, pseudo glyphs

K5597, God N as artist.

K5005, pre-enema preparation, women and men

But in the meantime, the 7 “chapters” of this PowerPoint presentation in the MPV, UFM show a helpful introduction to epigraphers, linguists and iconographers.

A bibliography on all Regional Gouged-and-Incised Vases and Bowls is Needed

If you are a PhD student doing a dissertation on gouged-and-incised vases, it would help to have a bibliography on each and every regional style, since different styles are found in Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatan, Quintana Roo, Belize, Peten, and the Maya Highlands.

I show two examples below that shows examples of Chipoc Style.

SARAVIA Orantes, Juan Francisco R.; GARAY, Alejandro and Miryam I. SARAVIA Orantes

2018 Dioses, reyes y comerciantes en la frontera: perspectivas iconográficas y epigráficas de las relaciones interregionales en el Altiplano Norte a partir de los estilos cerámicos Nebaj, Chamá, Chipoc y Chajkar. In *XXXI Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 2017* (edited by B. Arroyo, L. Méndez Salinas and G. Ajú Álvarez), pp. 109-120. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala.

SMITH, Robert E.

1952 Pottery from Chipoc, Alta Verapaz, Guatemala. *Contributions to American Anthropology and History*, No. 56. Carnegie Institution of Washington.

Suggested Reading on Iconography of God N

HELLMUTH, Nicholas M.

n.d. God N, The Iconography of the full range of this aged deity: From his Seashell Housing to his Sexual Lust and Spider Mon key Transformations. F.L.A.A.R. 172 pages in this in depth corpus of God N in Maya art. No date but probably 1990's. This is the longest discussion of God N that yet existed in that decade. Tons of photos were added in the 2024 FLAAR Reports.

HELLMUTH, Nicholas

2024a God N Iconography Part I, Photos from FLAAR Photo Archive. FLAAR Reports FLAAR (USA) and FLAAR Mesoamerica (Guatemala). 62 pages.

HELLMUTH, Nicholas

2024b God N Iconography Part II, Rollouts from Justin Kerr and also Nicholas Hellmuth. FLAAR Reports FLAAR (USA) and FLAAR Mesoamerica (Guatemala). 52 pages.

LOVE, Bruce (photos) and Meghan RUBENSTEIN (assembled)

2023 La Colección del Museo Dr. Juan Antonio Valdes, Uaxactún, Guatemala: Volumen 2. Contributions to Mesoamerican Studies. 503 pages in the downloadable PDF.

Would help students and scholars if every museum had their Maya-area artifacts in this quality of photos in color, and at this healthy size so you can see the details.

MARTIN, Simon

2015 The Old Man of the Maya Universe: A Unitary Dimension to Ancient Maya Religion. In *Maya Archaeology 3*, edited by Charles Golden, Stephen Houston, and Joel Skidmore, pp. 186–227. Precolumbia Mesoweb Press, San Francisco.

This shows more God N's than any other article or monograph.

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