

Pseudo-Glyphs on Chama & Related Styles of Late Classic Highland Maya Vases



Chapter 2 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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Chapter 2

Pseudo-Glyphs on Chama & Related Styles of Late Classic Highland Maya Vases

The Classic Maya of Chama, Nebaj and surrounding areas were great scribes and artists. Many of the Chama style vases are featured in lots of books on the Classic Maya. And many of the Nebaj battle scenes are equally impressive. But since these scenes are so beautiful, not much research has focused on how the hieroglyphic texts in these scenes sometimes vary from texts of the Peten area of the Maya Lowlands. Yes—PSS Sequence Dedicatory Formula do occur on Chama style and associated style vases and bowls—but the PSS is best known from Peten and adjacent Campeche (Calakmul being the origin of one regional variant of Codex Style vases). PSS texts are also found in Belize.

Since the present lecture is on Pseudo-Glyphs, there were days, weeks and months of library research to find a healthy corpus—that I present in this chapter.

There are obviously hundreds more vases from Chama, Nebaj and associated styles in museums across Guatemala and around the world. But the present chapter is a good start.

Let's now start with examples on polychrome vases of Chama Style, Guatemalan Highlands



Most vases were photographed by Hellmuth both in black and white and also with a Leica with 35mm Kodak transparency film. Slides are easier to scan than B&W negatives.

I would photograph all sides of each vase or bowl—so all those are at Dumbarton Oaks. In the present FLAAR Reports I just show the glyphs that are potential pseudo glyphs



If glyphs are repeated, should they be considered as potential pseudo glyphs even if each glyph can be read (so not sloppy decoration)?

When a hieroglyph is “not in Classic Maya sophisticated beautiful style” they are often written off as pseudo glyphs—such as here. Michael Coe shows lots of excellent Chama vases with perfect Maya hieroglyphs. But now it’s helpful to show Chama vases with different style of hieroglyphs.

The seated elite Maya individuals were painted by a knowledgeable and experienced painter. But these two hieroglyphs are clunky and look like they are using geometric designs as space fillers.

Dumbarton Oaks will put numbers on each artifact. Since there are over 30,000 images and since unless I win the PowerBall or MegaMillions lottery, I don’t have money to catalog that many images.



Would be interesting whether Capture One software could rescue more details.

But if you are an in-depth specialist in digital imaging software, with “filters” you should be able to rescue more details and create a black-and-white drawing that can assist epigraphers and linguists.



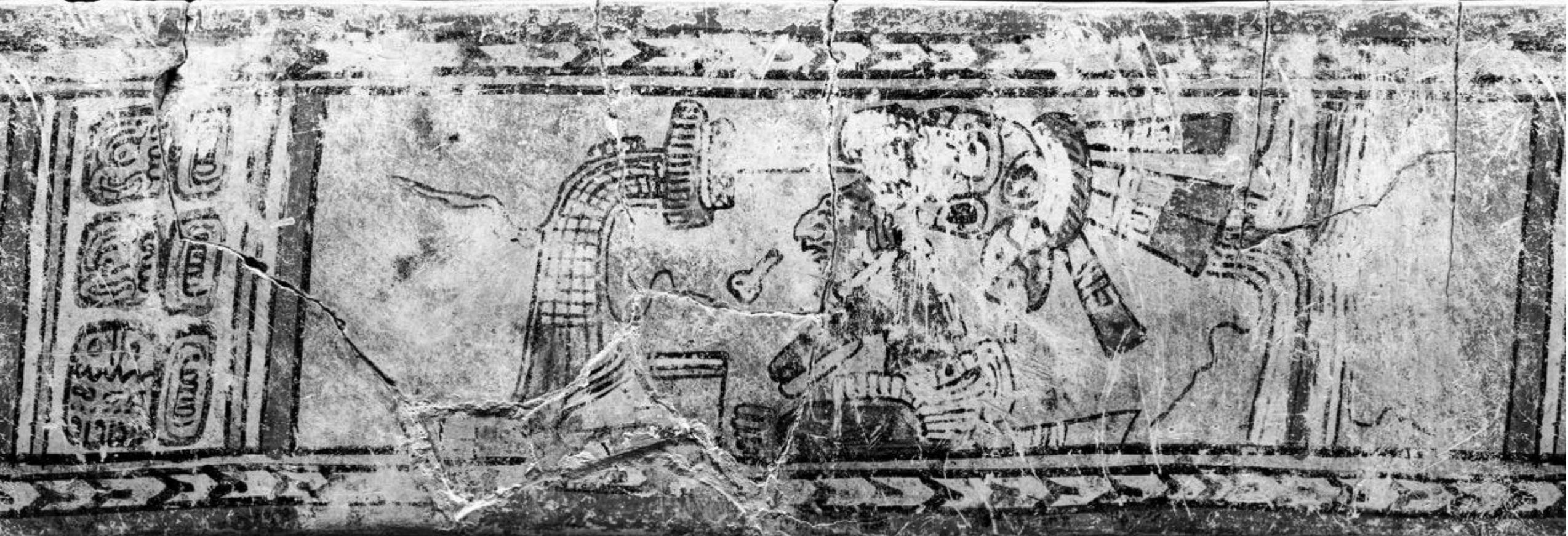
The noses on many Maya vases are almost in a “pointed” style.





We are working with bat specialist Jose Cajas to suggest what species of bat was the inspiration. His knowledge of bats is essential, since not every Maya bat is necessarily a Slicer Bat (False Vampire).

Bat on a Chama style Kerr rollout, K5224, Dumbarton Oaks database of improved digital file size.



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





Vase of typical medium “Chama vase height”, with traditional horizontal rows of chevrons, and vertical glyphs to separate the scenes. Lots of empty space, as typical of many chevron-style Chama vases.

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



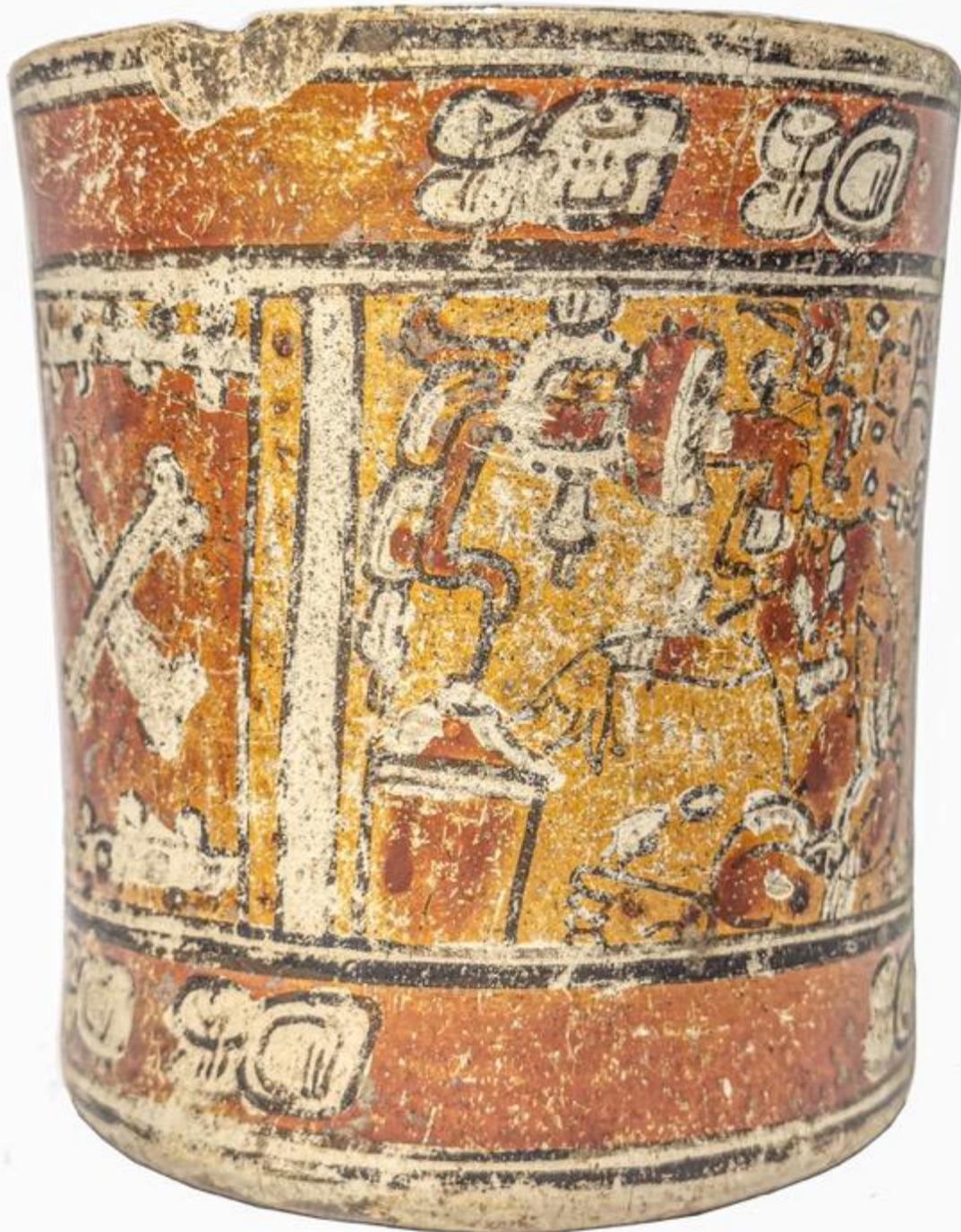
Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquin, digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth. Several decades ago the Junta Directiva and Curator of the MPV kindly provided a space for FLAAR to have a complete photo studio in the MPV facilities for several months—so we did not have to pack up the photo studio every night and store it. So it was possible to take dozens, scores of digital rollouts.

Repeated hieroglyphs, yes, obviously.

Simplified glyphs...well, a bit...but still plenty of content.

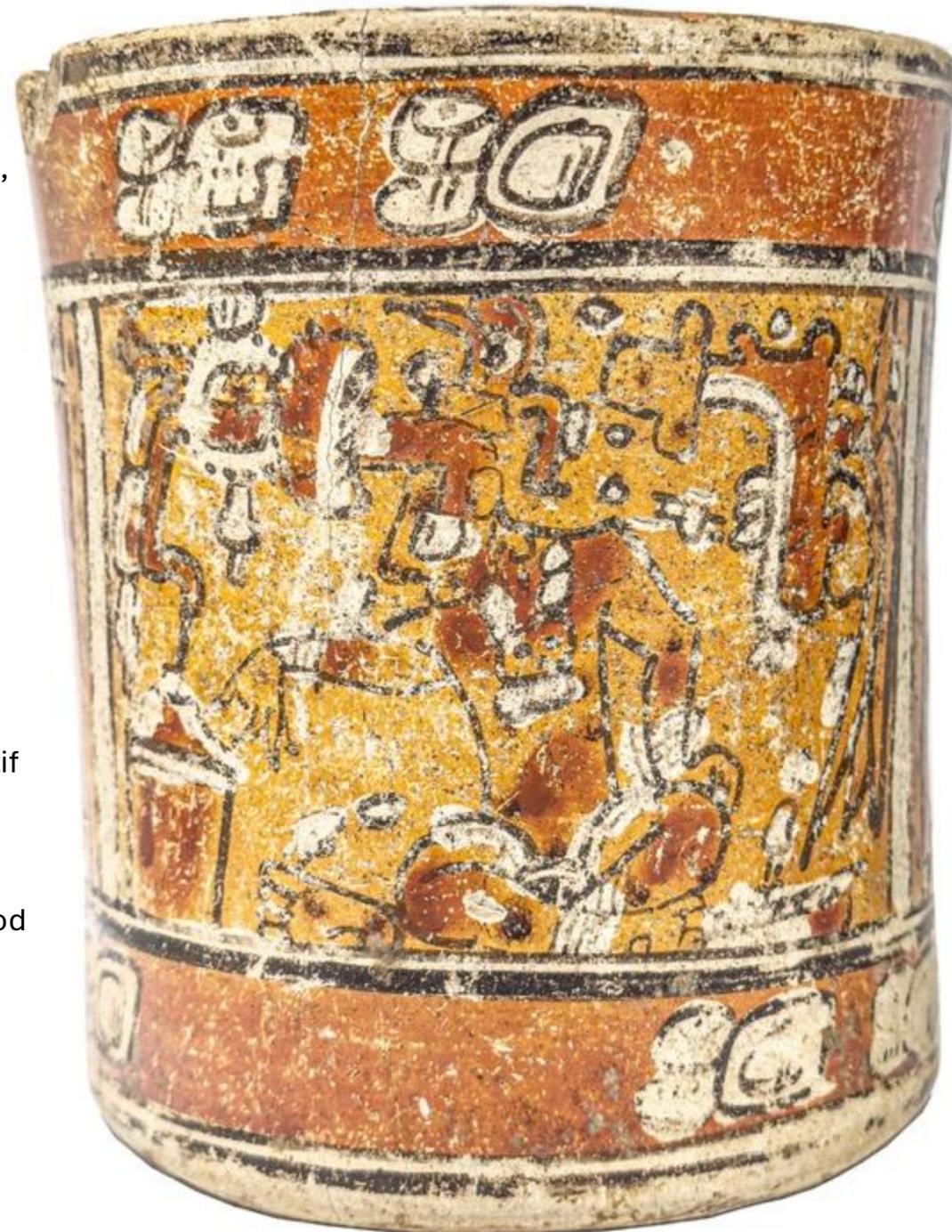
So just because a message is repeated is no reason to dismiss it as “Pseudo-Glyphs”. What would be better would be for an epigrapher and linguist to teach the world how to “read” the message presented in each regional style.





Museo Miraflores,
Highland Maya
vase, in “Chama
colors” and
Chama style
scene.

Same “deity”
features as on
other two vases:
fluffy flower-like
decorations
sticking out from
the front of the
headdress, with
“spangled-J” motif
rising out of the
back of the
headdress—both
are features of God
D on Peten style
scenes.





Both glyphs repeated. Also repeated on the lower area.



Similar prefix but different main sign.

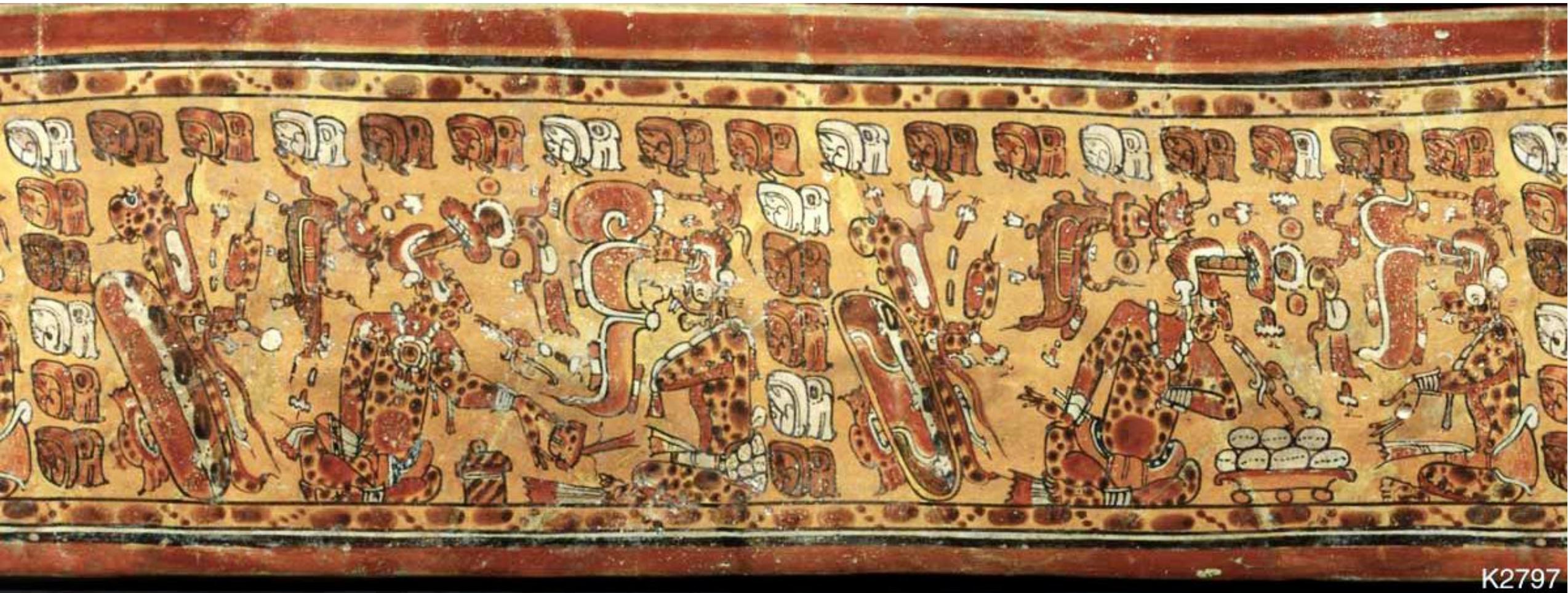
Repeated again on the other side.

Surely these are readable Maya hieroglyphs.



Museo Miraflores
Photo by David
Arrivillaga, FLAAR
Digital Photo Archive,
Dumbarton Oaks,
Trustees for Harvard
University.





Same “deity” features as on the previous two vases: fluffy flower-like decorations sticking out from the front of the headdress, with very thick “spangled-J” motif rising out of the back of the headdress—both are features of God D on Peten style scenes. God K, Ka’wil, is in front of each “God D”.

The same hieroglyphs repeated all across the upper part and also repeated in all the vertical columns. I would expect the hieroglyphs to have a prefix—but there it’s a postfix. Is this the personal style of this scribe, or is there a linguistic reason.

Kerr rollout, K2797.



Repeated simplified glyphs that could be considered pseudo glyphs. Amazing that this “Chama orange” vase has no scene.

Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquin. Digital rollout.



Even without horizontal row of chevrons or a row of other black and white spaces, the colors and style suggest a relationship to Chama area of the Maya Highlands.

This painter was fully capable of rendering the scene and the glyphs are not sloppy—they are just simplified and repeated.

95% of the rollouts in this FLAAR Reports are digital rollouts by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Digital Photo Archive, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University. About 60% are published here for the first time. It helps t have all rollouts available for iconographic research in addition to epigraphic and linguistic research.



Simplified and Repeated

Simplified and Repeated

Another “throne scene”, this time with jaguar pelage on the backs of the thrones (the seats themselves are not pictured). Rollout drawing published by Foncerrada and Lombardo 1979: page 16.



Museo Fundacion La Ruta Maya, digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth several decades ago.

This is the longest Highland Maya polychrome scene that I have yet seen—it was on a “plate” not a vase. We need to find this ceramic to show its size, shape, and proportions.

Normally, in scenes such as at Chichen Itza, each warrior has his “name glyph” in front of his head. Are these name glyphs here in this scene? And do the glyphs on the ceramics name the contents?



Is the “pointed nose” a style of one atelier, or the style of this area of the Maya Highlands?



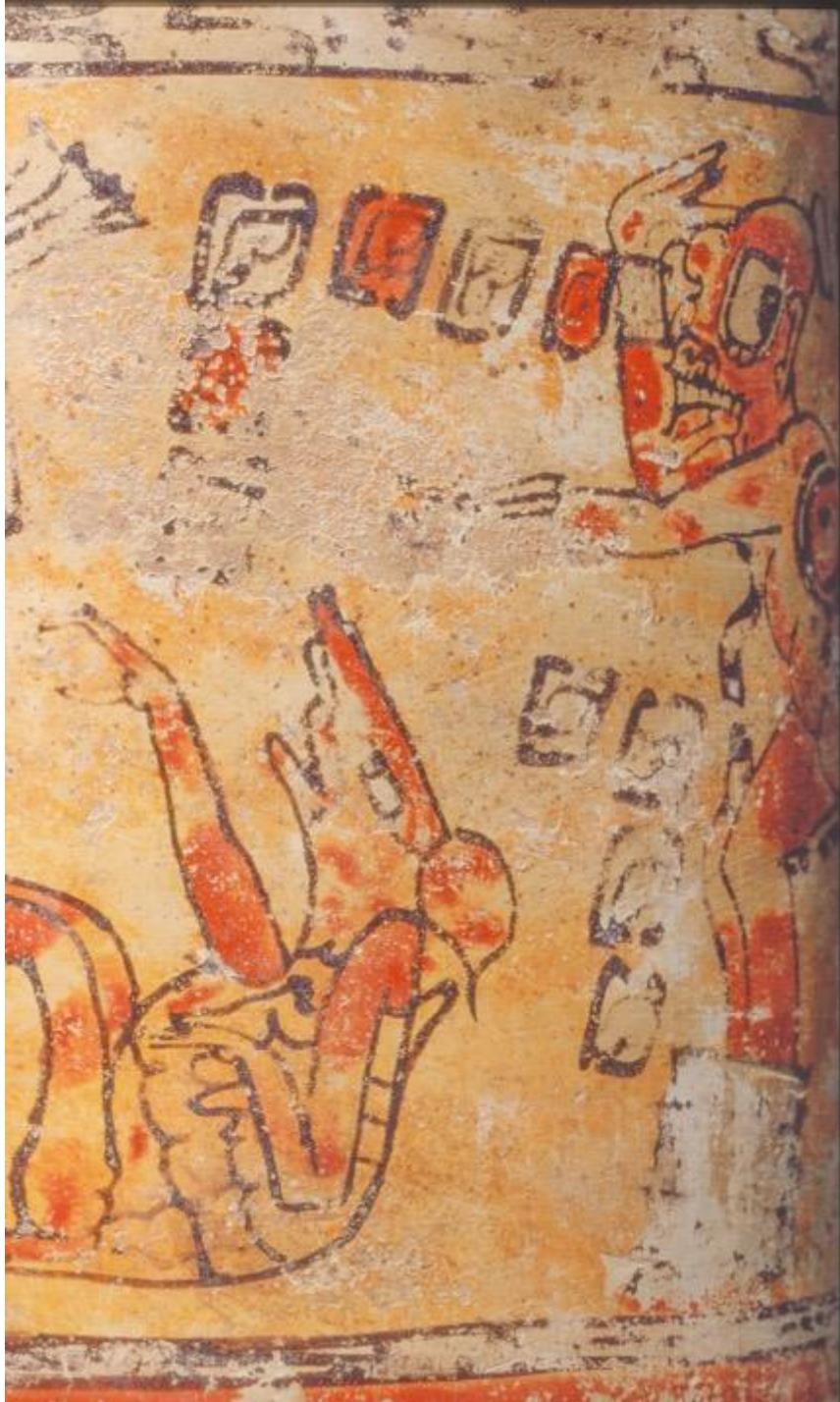
Glyphs are simplified, but clearly they nonetheless still had a message.

The legs of the two deities were painted with a thin black line.

The pseudo glyphs were painted with a thicker line.

Was the scribe a different person or simply using a different tool?

Need to check other scenes to see how often this difference is noted.





God N in his conch shell.

Possible
armadillo

I tend to call these Xibalba demons, devils or deities but the Maya cosmos has devils in more locations that merely under the earth.

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

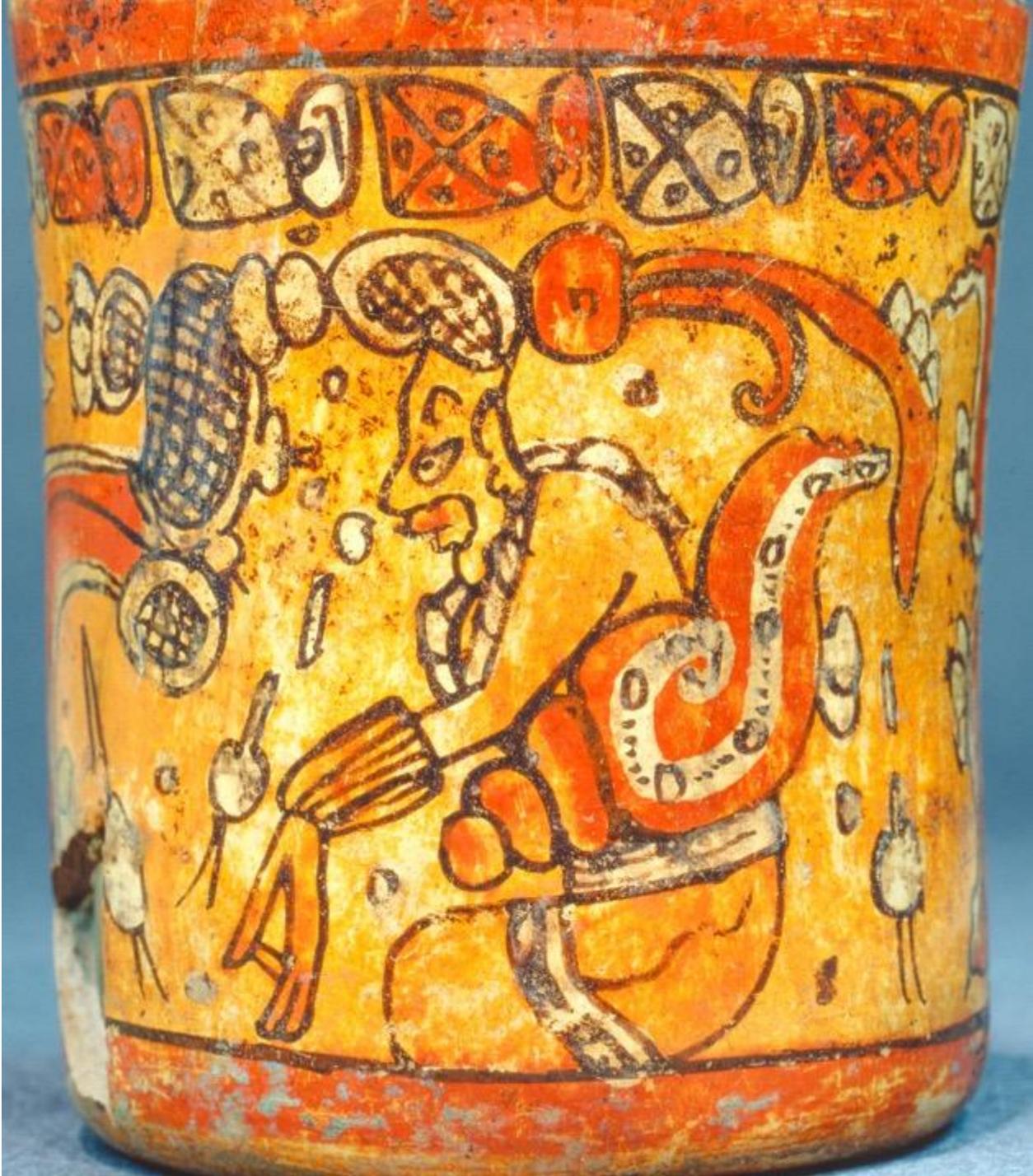
Glyphs with thick outline, legs with outline of thinner width.

If you Google iconography, God N, Hellmuth, FLAAR you will get the most complete corpus of God N scenes yet accumulated.

Although I estimate this scene is related to Chama style I would welcome other ideas. It helps to have a color photo to allow you to estimate that regional style is pictured.

With no decorative chevron bands, best not to caption this as Chama style, but the size, shape and colors suggest this low vase is from a nearby area that knew the Chama colors. Or—obviously painters at Chama produced a lot more than just vases with chevrons.



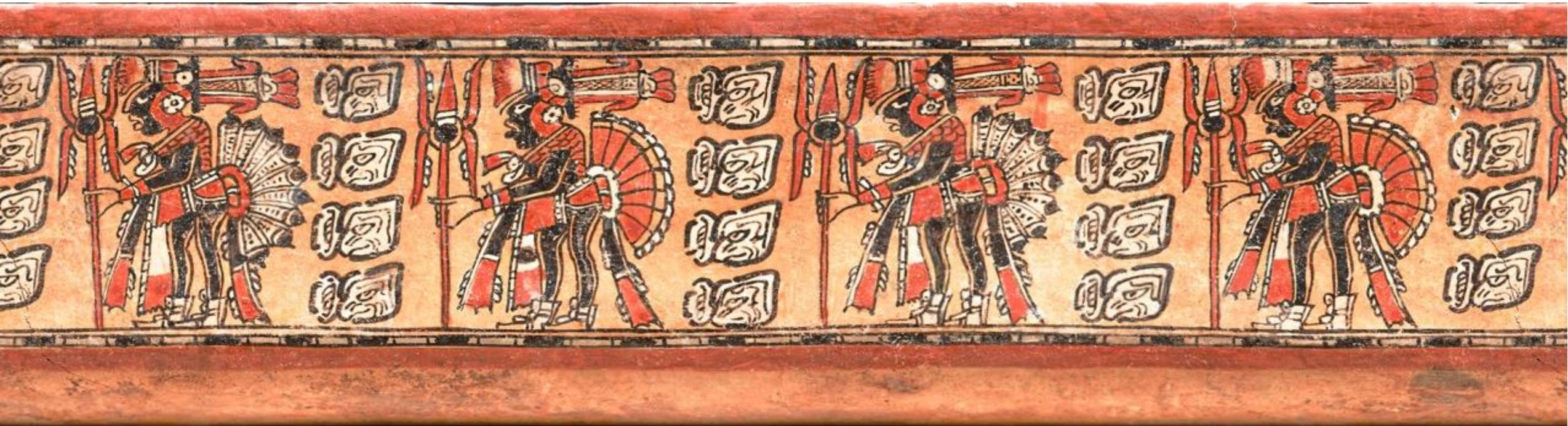


Repeated decorative pseudo glyphs.

The giant exaggerated conch shell has a row of dots that comes from the Surface of the Underwaterworld (Hellmuth 1987a and 1987b). The occupant of a conch shell is usually an elderly God N, but there are also younger variants.

With no decorative bands, best not to caption this as Chama style, but the size, shape and colors suggest this low vase is from a nearby area that knew the Chama colors.

As soon as the Dumbarton Oaks database has scanned and organized the Hellmuth photos from FLAAR, then hopefully we can find photos of all the other sides of this scene.



Estimated to be related to Chama Style. Museo Fundacion la Ruta Maya. In other words, although “Chama style” means a vase with a horizontal row of chevrons around upper and lower parts of the front, I estimate that other vases of same size and comparable color, that have different geometric shape on their horizontal bands, are from the same or nearby areas.

All twelve hieroglyphs are repeated, so they would tend to be called pseudo glyphs. But, what if this is a particular message that the scribe deliberately wanted to repeat a dozen times?

The feathers with black areas are excellent examples of ones used to decorate Tepeu 2 plates in Tikal Bu. 116 and Tikal Bu. 196.

Digital rollout by the FLAAR team—Eduard Sacayon would often work together with Hellmuth to achieve these precise digital rollouts.



Related to Chama Style, Museo Fundacion la Ruta Maya.

These hieroglyphs are both repeated and also simplified, but even if their message is short, what if there is still a message? The scribe painted them in a very precise manner.

Digital rollout with Better Light mounted on a 4x5" camera held by a sturdy tripod. FLAAR Digital Photo Archive, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.



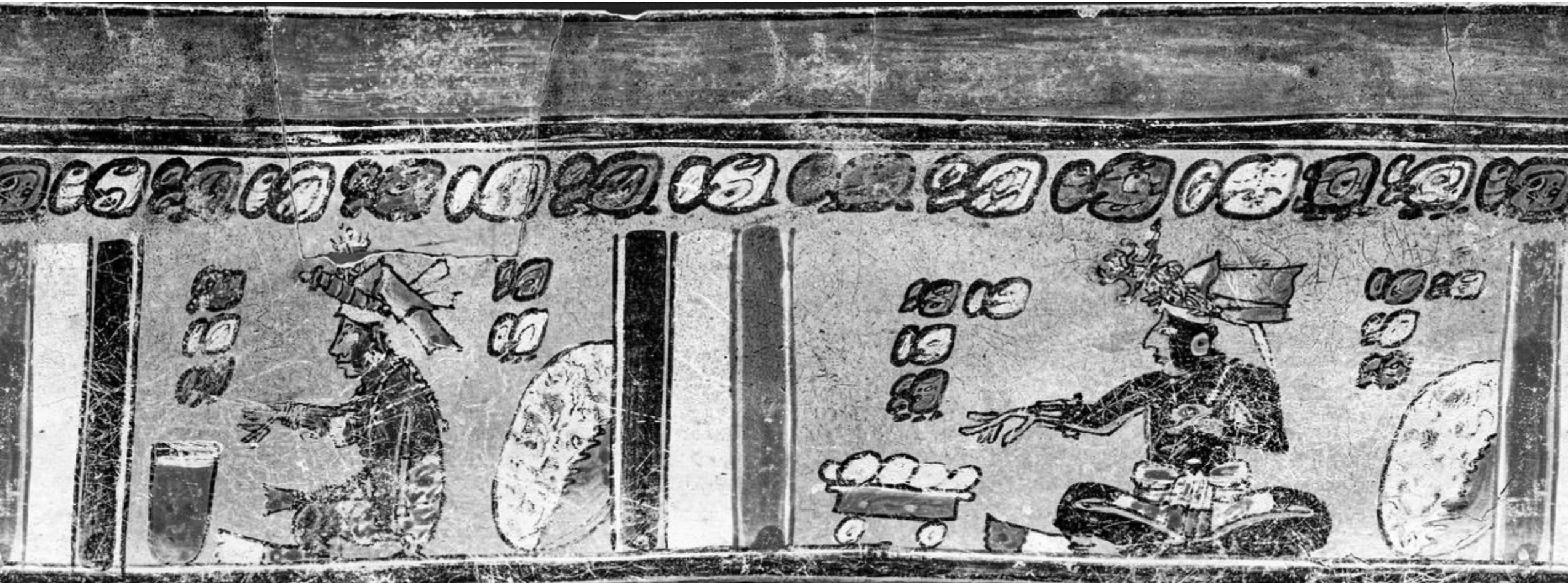
The two horizontal decorative bands and the colors of the scene suggest this is related to Chama Style (even with no chevrons). The hieroglyphs are so simplified, and so covered with colorant, that what few details were present are not always visible. Lots of repeats. I would accept classifying these as pseudo glyphs.

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

Simplified but not repeated—surely this text makes a statement that the Classic Maya of the Highlands could understand.



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



It helps also to see the vase in its original color so you can recognize that this is the same color as other Highland Maya vases.

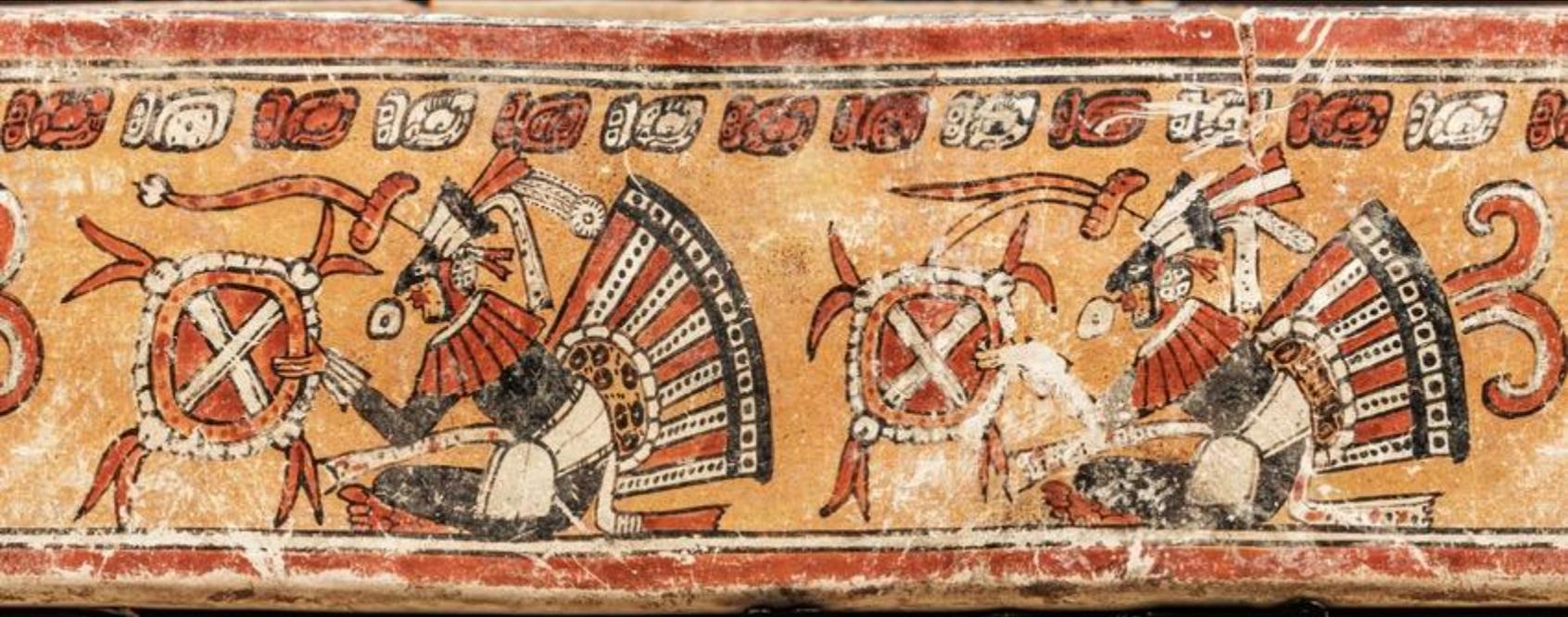


This is how this painter showed the scene facing right, which is very rare.

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



So I turned the scene around so that the hieroglyphs can be more easily compared and contrasted with other Maya Highland texts on “Chama orange” vases.





Repeats.

Repeats.

More repeats.



More repeats.

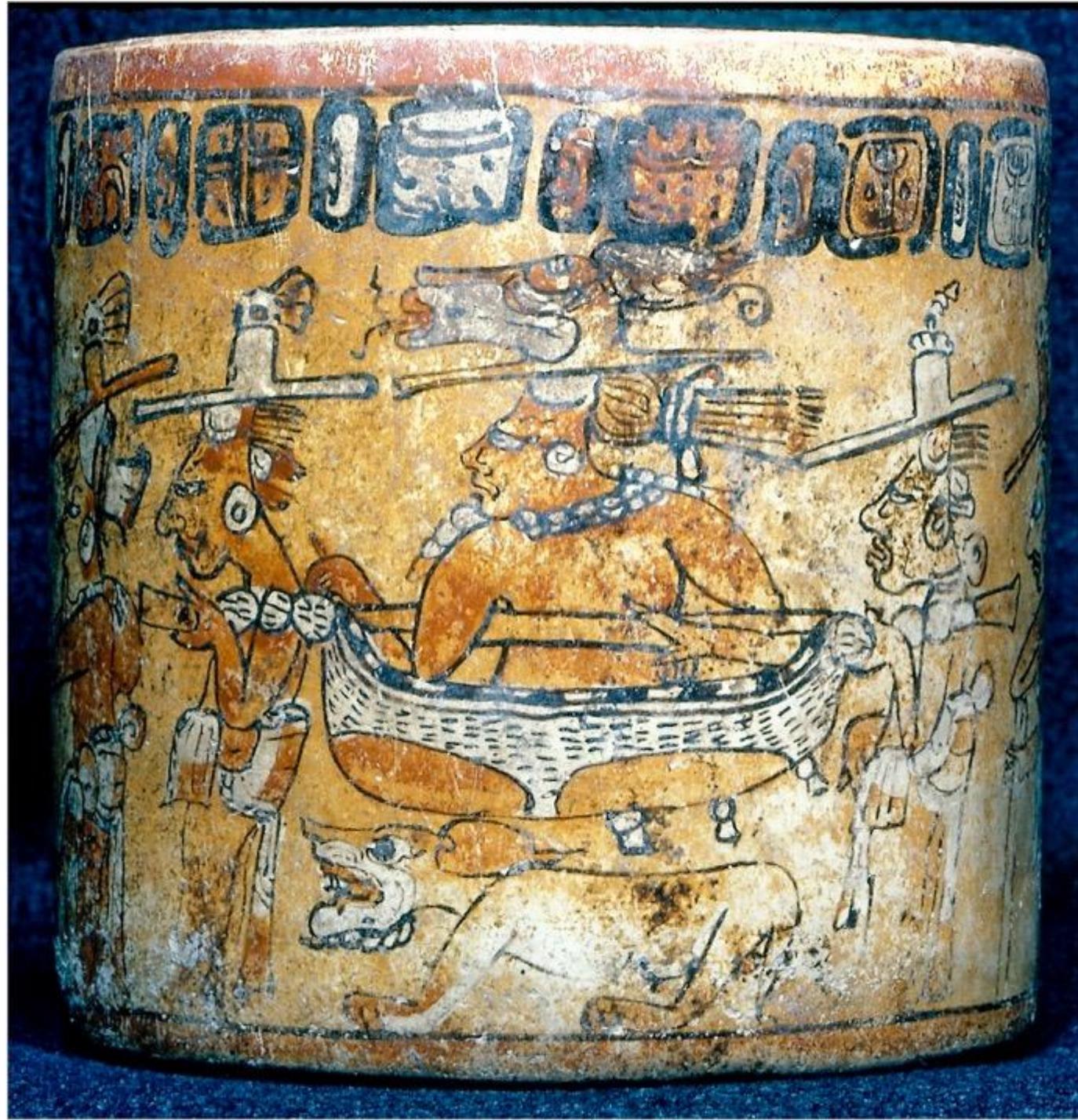
What needs to be done is another PhD dissertation to make an inventory of every “Pseudo Glyph” of each regional style, and thereby to show whether the “messages” of each regional style are often similar within that area. And whether any regional message of one area surprises us by being found in another area. This inventory should be coordinated with the helpful inventory already put together in Inga Calvin’s year 2006 PhD dissertation on pseudo-glyphs.



This text should not be termed Pseudo-Glyphs—this is a meaningful text. There are over 21 indigenous languages in Guatemala today so surely were regional preferences for writing hieroglyphic inscriptions over 13,000 years ago. I estimate this is from the Maya Highlands (meaning not from Peten) but I would welcome suggestions.

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

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

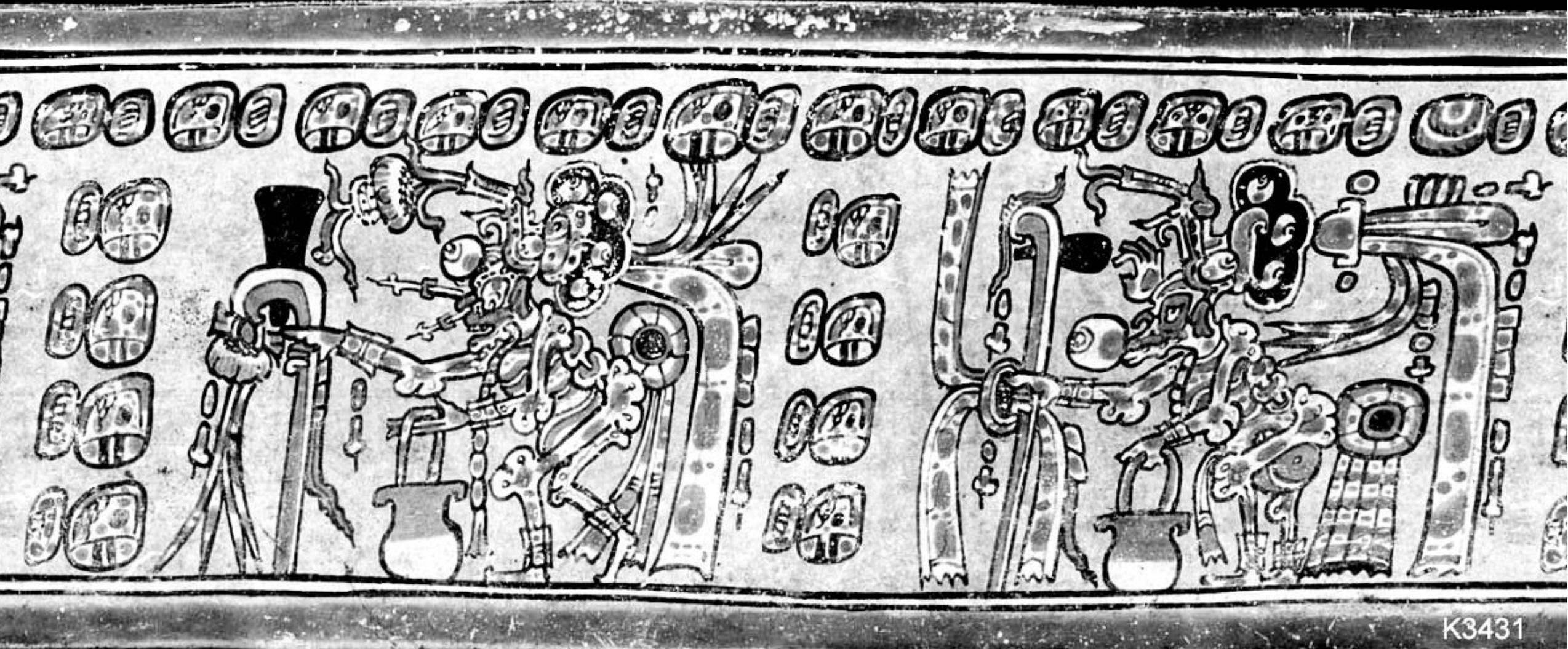




These glyphs need to be shown up-close and at large-size, so that the details can be seen.

There are lots of this “palanquin parade scenes” on Chama-Nebaj style Highland Maya vases.

Digital rollout by Norma Cho Cu, FLAAR Mesoamerica, using Photomerge of Adobe Photoshop to merge ten iPhone photos by Nicholas Hellmuth, January 2026, photographed specifically for this February lecture on Pseudo-Glyphs. We thank the team at Museo Fundacion La Ruta Maya, and the team at Museo Miraflores for providing out photo teach space to use our turntable to produce this rollout photo.



Xibalba demon, devil or deity.

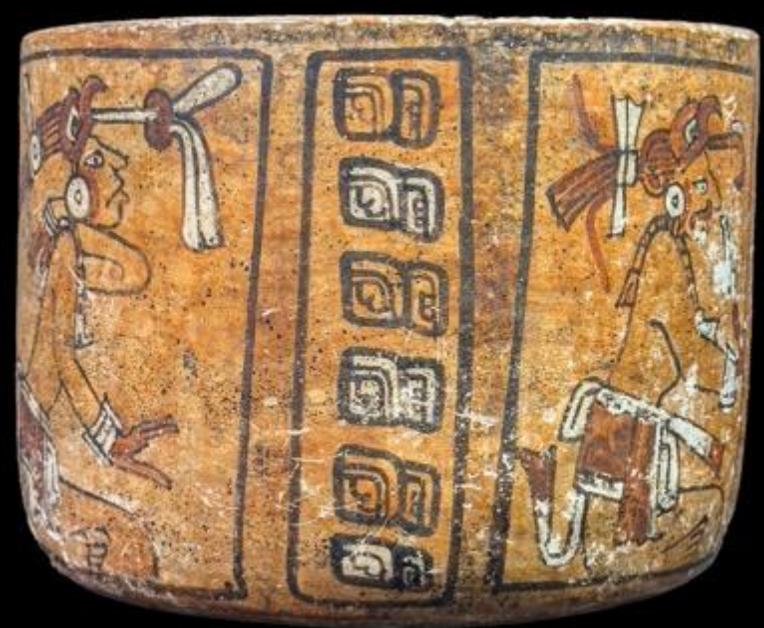
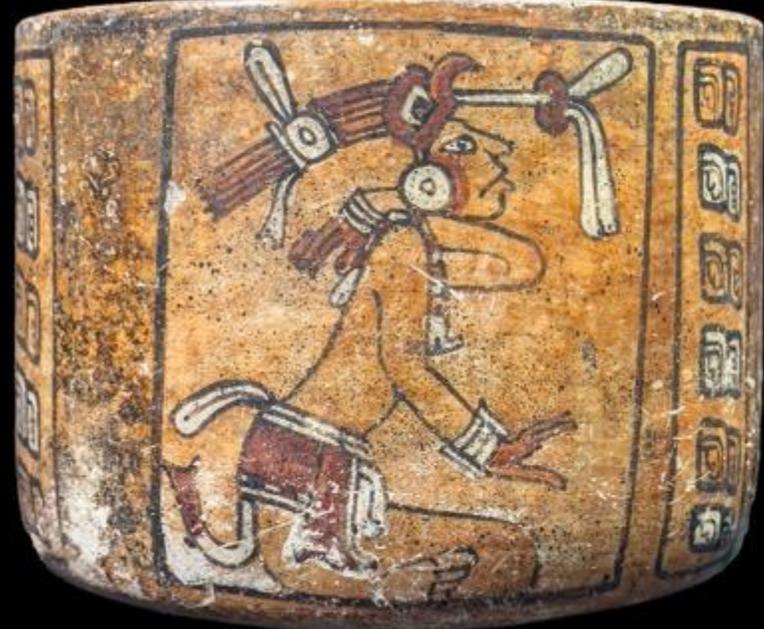
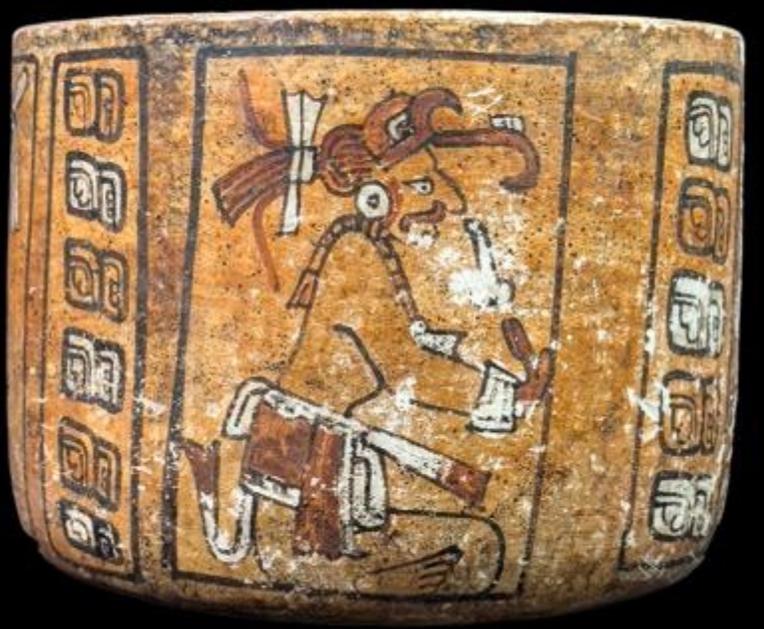
Skeletal Deer Demon, with a human hand as the shape of his antler.

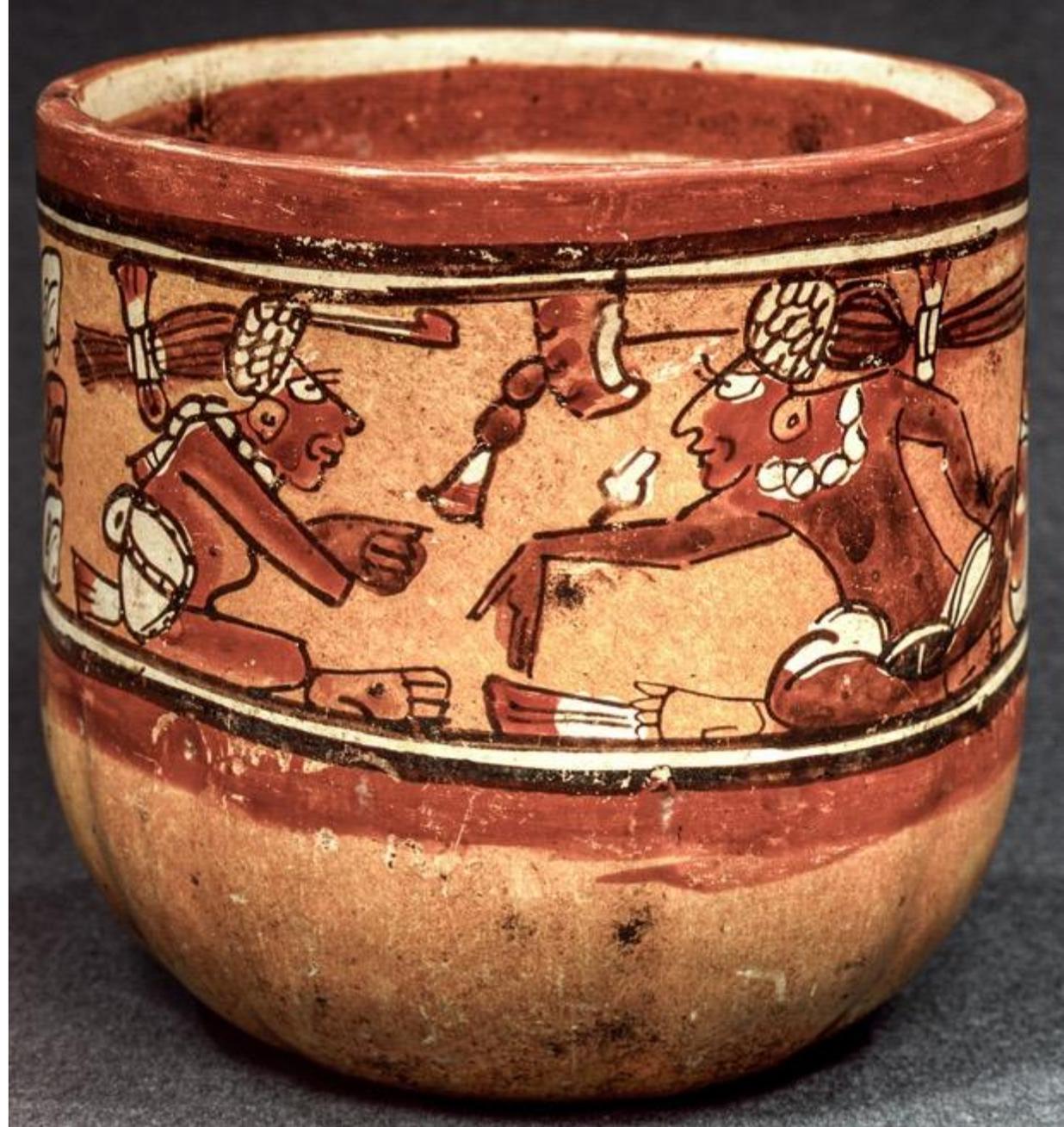
The vertical glyphs are identical to most of the horizontal glyphs (there is one exception at the upper right).



Simplified, and repeated—both aspects of “Pseudo Glyphs”. But the message that the scribe or patron wanted to portray was evidently important enough to be repeated. And simplified so that Maya people could understand the message.

Museo Fundacion la Ruta Maya.





Chama colors, but surely the same colors were used in many other Late Classic areas nearby. Three neatly rendered but simplified and repeated Maya hieroglyphs.



Fig. 29. Simplified and repeated pseudo glyphs in colors that are potentially associated with Chama style.

All photos are digital rollouts by Nicholas Hellmuth with a Better Light tri-linear scan back operated by special rollout software on a portable Macintosh computer. Hellmuth was the beta tester for the first model, the Dicomed Better Light. Then all suggestions for improvements were built into an improved rollout camera that we then used to replace the Dicomed. That said, the Dicomed rollout camera produced more detail than any film-based (pre-digital) rollout camera.

This scribe perhaps had not much experience painting a diagonal text.

Although all the glyphs are repeats, some of the prefixes lack the line under the spot.

Surely this glyph means something—it has prefix and subfix and main sign.





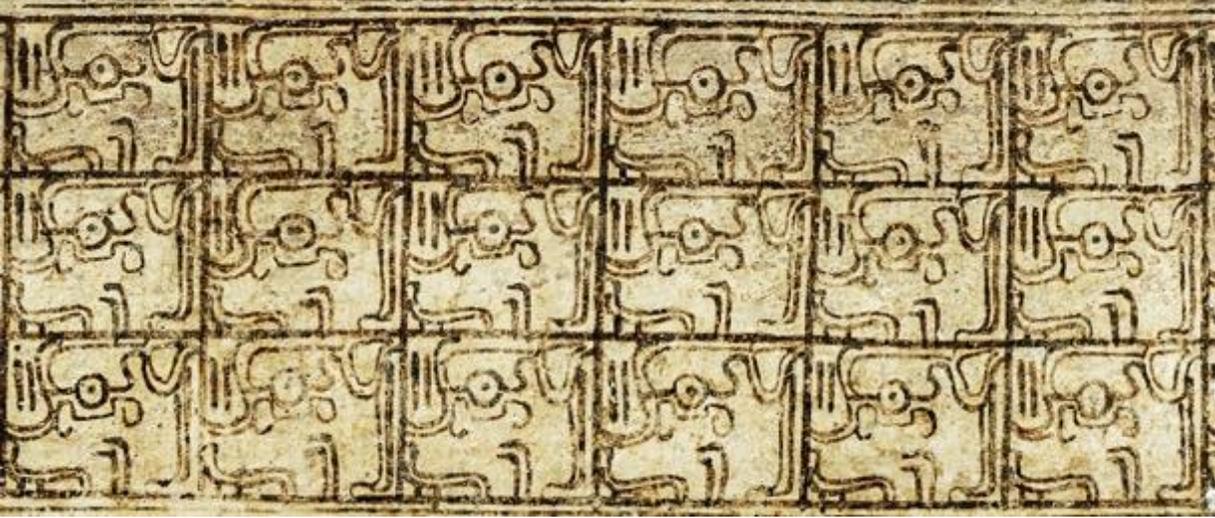
Repeated glyphs, repeated SIX times, but the Hix arrangement of three spots were obviously legible.



Museo Popol Vuh,
UFM, digital rollout by
Nicholas Hellmuth.



Probably Highlands, but not necessarily Chama. Kerr rollout K3102 shows the same triple rows of bat heads, but by a different scribe. I would consider the row of designs around the upper and lower areas as designs rather than pseudo glyphs, but would be interesting to search the database of Inga Calvin. The repeated heads of the bats I would consider as portraits of bats rather than bat hieroglyphs, but I would be open to suggestions by epigraphers that these are also bat hieroglyphs. What I find notable is that a scribe could produce so many nearly identical decorations on the face of this bat. But the middle column is narrower than the column at it's left. Did the scribe have a "stamp"? But if you look closely, each one looks individually painted in some aspects.



MPV-UFM, crop from digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth.

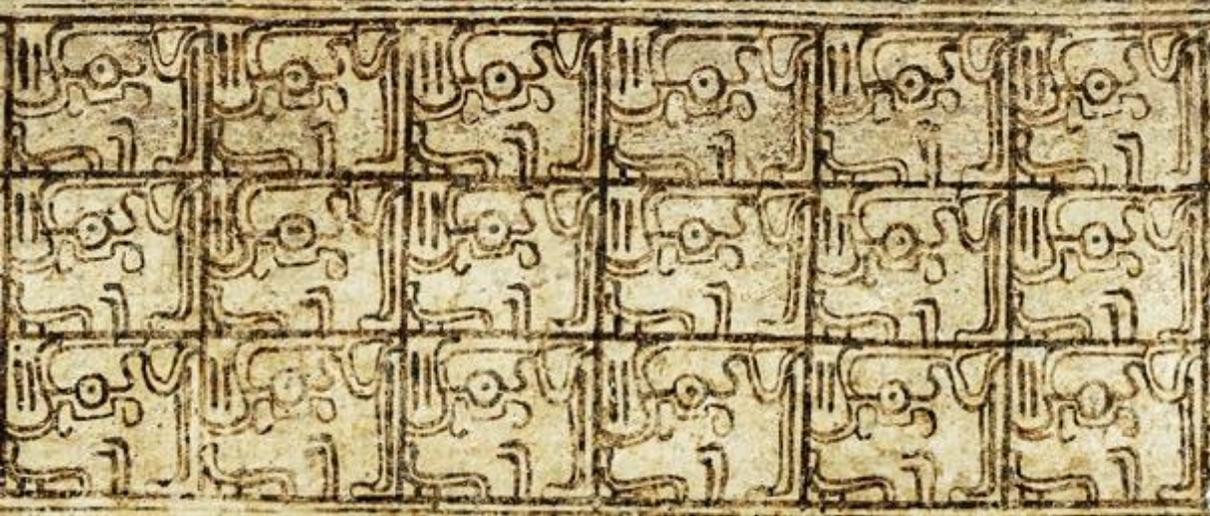


K3102



The two Kerr rollouts are painted by the same atelier.

K7026



MPV-UFM, crop from digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth.



LACMA, in DO database, when you search for K3102 you get K5036. But in Maya Vase Database you get what I show.



To make these glyphs face left, I had to rotate them from K5036. They are same or at least related atelier as the others--but none are same painter as the glyphs at MPV-UFM.



K7026

These two Kerr rollouts are painted by the same atelier.

No mention of whether Highland or Lowland in the Maya Vase Database.



Kerr rollout, K7026, Hudson Museum, Orono, ME.

If epigraphers, linguists and iconographers want to consider these bat heads as “decoration”, I can understand that. But bats are very common in hieroglyphic texts, especially at Copan, but also elsewhere. And—there are rows of literal Pseudo-Glyphs around the top and bottom of this vase. Yes, these can be considered as decoration—but they also surely had a message. Whether the message is the bats of Xibalba is one obvious suggestion, but I estimate that bats and caves are in lots of other myths around the multi-cultural Maya areas of Mesoamerica. But at least the present chapter is one of the first places where all known bat-mass ceramics have been shown at healthy size and compared and contrasted with each other.



K3102

Complete circumference, Kerr rollout, K3102, Maya Vase Database.

I show a close-up view on the following page.



K3102

Closer view of the right half of this Kerr rollout. The file size on the Maya Vase Database is not adequate to show close views, but the Dumbarton Oaks database is greatly improved. I have not yet found this on the D.O. database.

Stylized glyph-like motifs decorate the upper part of this ceramic.

A different artistic style decorates another horizontal row—these are a repeated “statement” that consists of two glyphs.

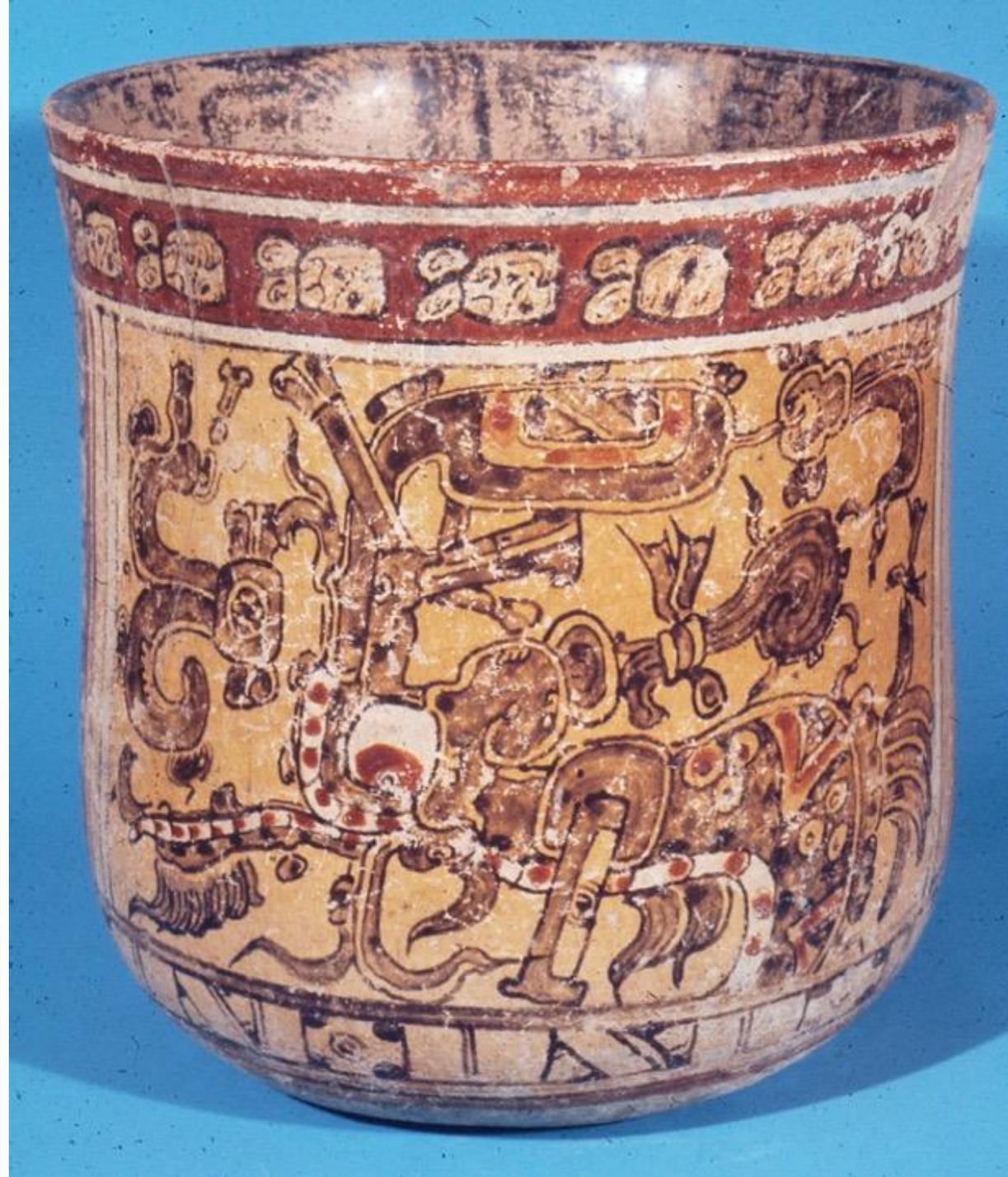
Lots of material for a student wanting to learn about hieroglyphs beyond just the PSSequene dedicatory formula.



Lots of empty space between each hieroglyph.

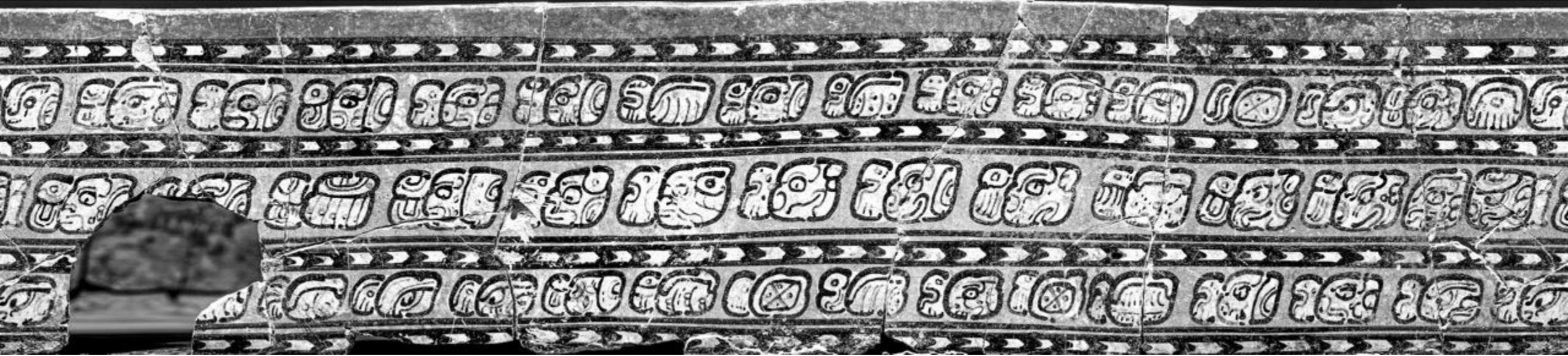
Need to find views of the other sides.

Simple Sky Band is around the lower part.



Pure Chama (with chevron bands around upper and lower part).

Lots of repeated hieroglyphs but lots not repeated—surely this can be translated by epigraphers.



This is potentially the longest Maya hieroglyphic text on any pure Chama style vase yet published.

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



This capable Chama area scribe perhaps had training in Peten, or had available texts from Peten in his “library”.

This is clearly a Primary Standard Sequence (PSS) dedicatory formula, albeit rather short. Peten vases and plates often have 17 or more glyphs in a single PSS text—and sometimes 21 (occasionally a few more).

This final illustration in the Chapter on Chama and Nebaj style hieroglyphic texts is to document that the conservative PSS was indeed known to many Chama area workshops. Yet most of the texts that they produced were not PSS—was that because not every scribe know how to paint complex hieroglyphs of a PSS—or were they in a hurry—or was the message simply not the same as in a long PSS dedicatory formula?

Lots of questions for epigraphers, linguists and iconographers. But this mass of photos will help further research.



Digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth, late 1990's-2010.

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