

Maya Pseudo-Glyphs and “Pseudo-Sky-Bands”
Another “Regional Dialect” ?

Atypical Hieroglyphs on Tepeu 3 (Terminal Classic) Mold-Impressed Bowls and Vases



Chapter 5 for multi-chapter Presentation:
Que tal si los pseudoglifos en cada region maya son un dialect regional?

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

Nicholas Hellmuth

conferencia Presencial

Jueves 26 de febrero 2026

7:00 pm

Edificio del Museo Popol Vuh

Universidad Francisco Marroquin

Introduction to Pseudo-Glyphs and Pseudo-Sky-Bands on Mold-Carved Bowls, Tepeu 3, Maya Lowlands



Molded-Carved Tepeu 3 vases in rare occasions have a traditional PSSequence Dedicatory Formula. But often there are no glyphs around the top of the vase at all. Occasionally the only glyphs are within the scene and are square-cartouche glyphs. Molded-Carved Tepeu 3 bowls don't really have the space for a traditional PSS round their upper part. Often they have a “pseudo” Sky Band (meaning a Sky Band that is very “Terminal” Classic and only containing a few reminders from traditional conservative regional Late Classic Maya Lowlands Sky Bands (shown on hundreds of pages of recent FLAAR Reports by Hellmuth). Often the upper “message area” on these Tepeu 3 low bowls have a mixture of Pseudo-Glyphs and Pseudo-Sky Band motifs.

There are so many Molded-Carved vases and bowls that for the present chapter in the MPV UFM February 2026 lecture I discuss just the Pseudo aspects (so not the iconography of positions of the warriors, nor their atlatl spear-throwers, etc.). But I do comment on whether each side of the bowl is molded with the same identical mold—or not. I have been interested in mold-impressed Early Classic cylindrical tripods from the Costa Sur area of Guatemala: sometimes each panel is the same mold but often each panel on the same ceramic is a different mold even when the scene is the same). Alejandro Gonzales, Museo Miraflores (Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala City) is also studying this aspect of mold-impressed early Classic Costa Sur cylindrical tripods.

I initially tended to call all Molded-Carved Tepeu 3 bowls and vases as “Pabellon Molded-Carved” but archaeologists focused on the Terminal Classic (Tepeu 3) of Peten, Belize and adjacent areas of Mexico have suggested that there are regional differences—and they give each a different new name (instead of the generic older name Pabellon Molded-Carved). As a sample, two new names are:

- Sahcaba Molded-carved (Nakum: Zratka, Helmke, Hermes, Koszkuł, Ting, Bishop, and Bojkowska 2020: Figure 3)
- Ahk'utu' Molded-carved (Belize: Ting and co-authors).

Hieroglyphs on Gouged Incised and then Tepeu 3 Molded-Carved Vases and Bowls



This is not a Pabellon Molded-Carved scene but it is either very late Tepeu 2 or more likely early Tepeu 3. The hieroglyphs around the top could be considered pseudo-glyphs. The glyph-like designs around the the top and the bottom were surely “readable” to the Classic Maya but are definitely not normal hieroglyphs. The diagonally crossed-bands included the lower horizontal area remind me of “Pseudo-Sky Band” motifs from Tepeu 3 bowls.



The two rows of hieroglyphs on the digital rollout. To be studied by an epigrapher you would want to have the original digital rollout at high-resolution and then enlarge each individual hieroglyph to see which are unique and which are duplications.

And then compare these texts with lots of other late Tepeu 2 and early Tepeu 3 hieroglyphic texts on other vases.



The iconography and Type-Variety aspects of Molded-Carved vases and bowls have been studied but would now help to focus on their hieroglyphs.

This “Pseudo-Sky Band shares some features with the other side of the bowl.

Zip Monster of Sky Band

Ignore the color differences, these are two sides of the same bowl.



Same “scene” but clearly two completely different molds.

No Zip Monster on this side of the same bowl.

Pseudo-Glyphs???

Digital Rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth, so more precise and higher resolution than old-fashioned rollouts.



FLAAR Digital Photo Archive, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.



Here you can see that both panels are from the same low bowl—but different molds.

Zip Monster



All rollouts should be cited: digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Digital Photo Archive, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.

Pseudo-Glyphs???



In black-and-white the colors do not distract from the scene—so easier to study details of glyphs and scenes in a black-and-white rollout.

The vertical areas are more glyph-like than Sky Band-like.





“Similar” scene but completely different molds and hieroglyphs are different.





We show the same birds in this hieroglyphic text in a previous photo.



The horizontal band has some repeated motifs, and the size is a bit “stretched” for a traditional Maya glyph with prefixes and postfixes on some main signs. Not very similar to Tepeu 3 “pseudo-Sky Bands”—more glyphic but I would be glad to learn more from epigraphers and archaeo-astronomers.

With cross-lighting in “Nicholas style” you can see that these ceramic artists were experienced in cleaning a scene after molding it.





Bird

Bird



Glyph, or
“space
filler”?

Glyph, or
“space
filler”?

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





Digital photos have good resolution so you can see details better.

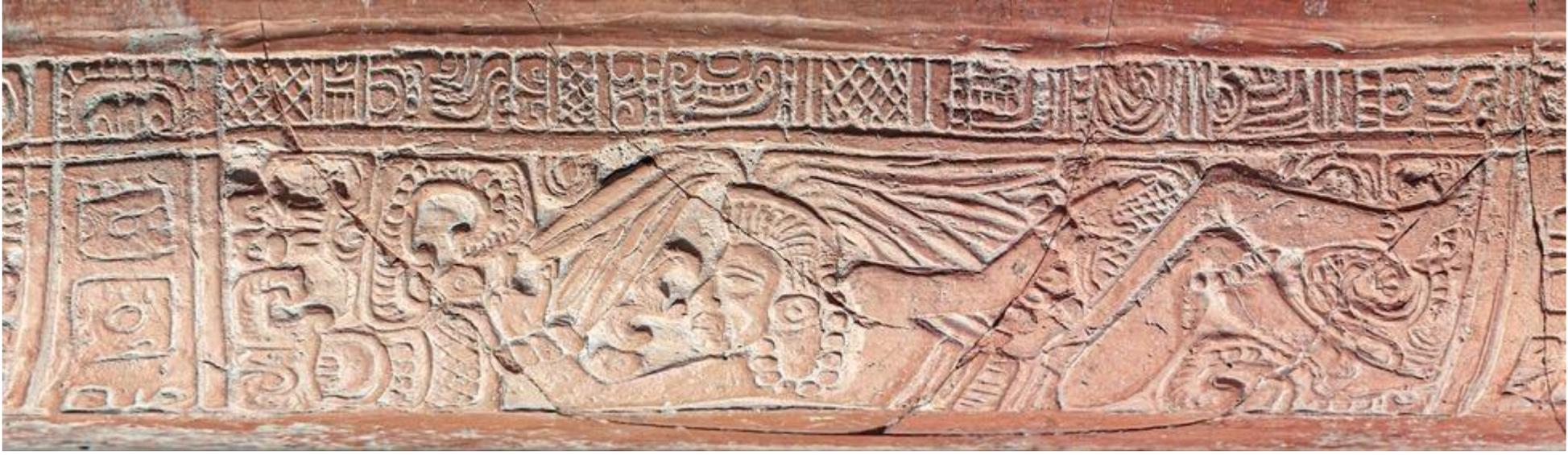
Remember, that many (but not all) Tepeu 3 molded-carved scenes have glyphs in square cartouches. Square cartouches are the norm for Xochicalco, for Rio Blanco ceramic scenes from Veracruz, and from many other areas of Mexico—so it is probable that many people with a different language were the patrons or ceramic artists producing these bowls. Yes, the bowls were produced in the Maya Lowlands—but during Tepeu 3 times there was clearly foreign influence before the final “Maya collapse”. Lots of Maya stelae have square hieroglyphs together in the same inscription as traditional Maya hieroglyphs. A Jimbal stela in MUNAE is one of many examples—more are at Seibal (Ceibal) and other Maya sites.



It helps to show the digital rollout and also the digital photo of the shape of the bowl. It's not easy to accomplish a rollout of a curved shape like this—how do you keep everything in focus?

And, how do you illuminate the lower part of the scene?





My goal starting in the 1970's was to use the best camera equipment, to have available the absolutely best lighting, and to use "cross-lighting" to document as many details as possible.

And, to illuminate the bottom of a curved bowl—best way is to photograph it upside down—then rotate it for the illustration.



Space filler?
Or a message?





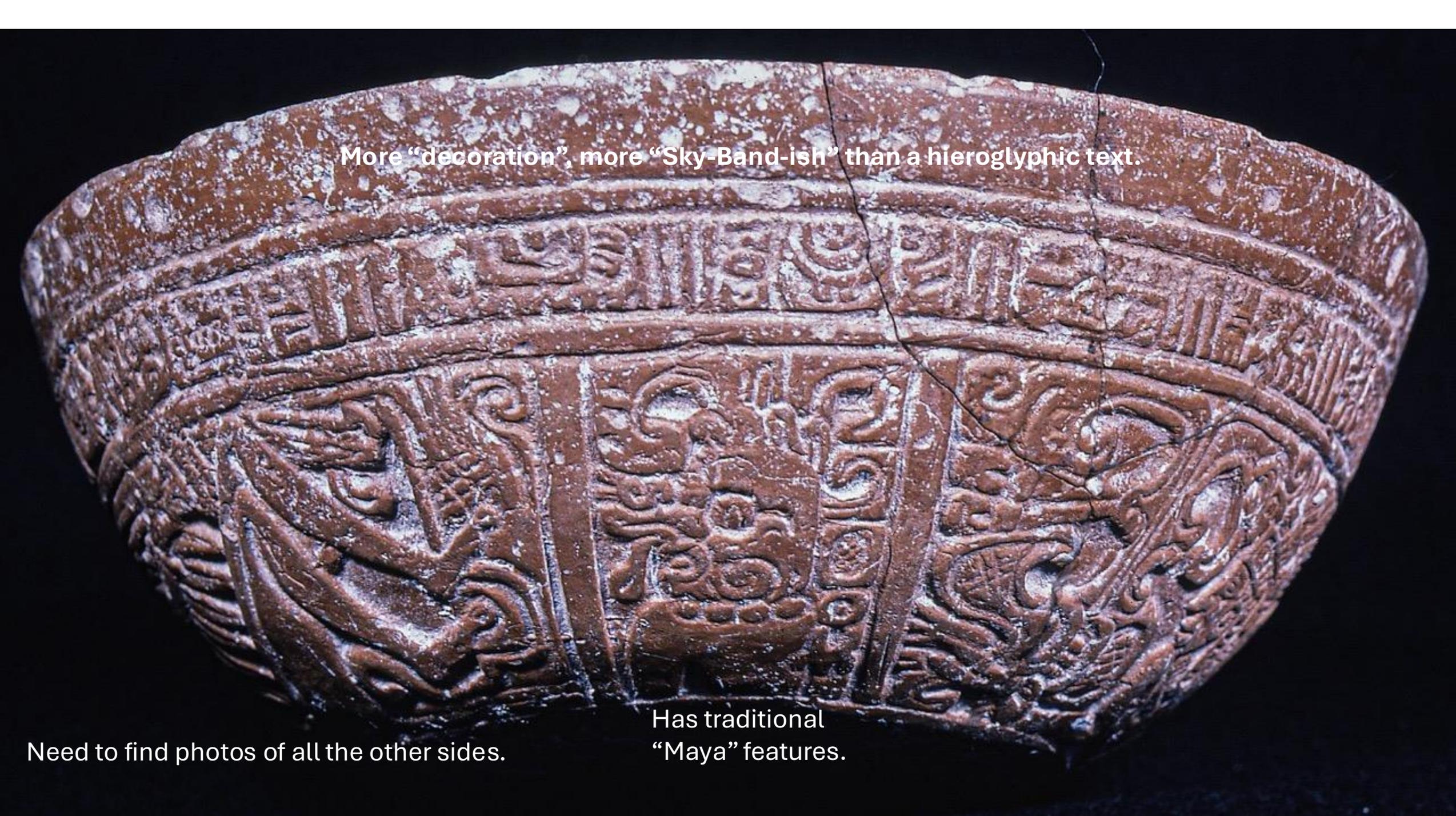
4-petalled flower,
like a Kin concept

Not common in Late
Classic Maya Sky Bands

Not as "late" not as
"foreign" as the
scroll to the left

"Splayed all over the place" position.





More “decoration”, more “Sky-Band-ish” than a hieroglyphic text.

Need to find photos of all the other sides.

Has traditional
“Maya” features.

Summary and Concluding Comments on Hieroglyphs in the Horizontal and Vertical Areas of Molded-Carved Tepeu 3 Bowls

The purpose of showing this tiny corpus of Tepeu 3 mold-impressed bowls is to suggest that these texts (those that are not Pseudo-Sky Bands) should (in the future) all be gathered together to see if they form a regional (and temporal—Terminal Classic) variant. And, if dozens, scores of these bowls can be rolled out digitally and/or photographed with cross-lighting, then the intended “message” of the “texts” and the intended message of the “Pseudo-Sky Bands” can be interpreted.

Keep in mind that the “message” of the bowls is sometimes similar to warriors on vases, but the scenes on vases are often more tranquil—meetings and greetings—and sometimes have beautiful PSequence dedicatory formula glyphs (so not Pseudo-Glyphs whatsoever).

Lots of the Tepeu 3 Mold-Impressed vases have glyphs with square cartouches, usually within the scenes, so not in a band around the entire top. Not much space for square cartouches in the scenes on bowls.

Many capable archaeologists and iconographers and ceramicists have studied and published helpful articles on Tepeu 3 mold-impressed-and-then-carved-to-clean-the-scene vases and bowls. But fresh PhD dissertations need to be researched to show a more complete corpus—the FLAAR Digital Photo Archive and the FLAAR 35mm Scanned Photo Archive are both at Dumbarton Oaks, so a research fellow there would have access (since it will take several years to put all these photos on-line).

Introductory list of suggested reading on Tepeu 3 Molded-Carved Bowls and Vases

CHASE, Arlen F. and Diane Z. CHASE

2001 Terminal Classic Status-Linked Ceramics and the Maya “Collapse:” De Facto Refuse at Caracol, Belize The Terminal Classic in the Maya Lowlands: Collapse, Transition, and Transformation, edited by Don Rice, Prudence Rice, and Arthur Demarest. Westview Press.

CULBERT, T. Patrick

1993 The Ceramics of Tikal: Vessels from the Burials, Caches, and Problematical Deposits. *Tikal Report 25A*. University Museum Monograph 81. University of Pennsylvania.

FORSYTH, D.

2005 A survey of terminal classic ceramic complexes and their socioeconomic implications. In: S. L. Lopez Varela, A. E. Foias (editors) *Geographies of power: understanding the nature of Terminal Classic pottery in the Maya Lowlands*. Archaeopress, Oxford, pp 7- 22.

HELMKE, Christophe G. B.

1999a Molded-carved Vases as Indicators of the Social Status of Cave Users in the Terminal Classic. Paper presented at the 64th *Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology*.

HELMKE, Christophe G. B.

2000a Terminal Classic Molded-carved Ceramics from Structures 193, 198 and 199, Baking Pot, Cayo District, Belize. The Western Belize Regional Cave Project: A Report of the 1999 Field Season, edited by Cameron S. Griffith, Reiko Ishihara and Jaime J. Awe, pp. 15-42. *Department of Anthropology, Occasional Paper No. 3*, University of New Hampshire, Durham.

HELMKE, Christophe G. B.

2000b Notes on Terminal Classic Molded-carved Ceramics from Pacbitun, Cayo, Belize. Unpublished reports submitted to the Archaeology Laboratory, Department of Anthropology, Trent University.

HELMKE, Christophe G. B. and Christina HALPERIN

2001 A Terminal Classic Molded-Carved Vase from Actun Nak Beh, Roaring Creek Valley, Cayo District, Belize. The Western Belize Regional Cave Project: A Report of the 2000 Field Season, edited by Reiko Ishihara, Cameron S. Griffith & Jaime J. Awe, pp. 35-63. *Department of Anthropology, Occasional Paper No. 4*, University of New Hampshire

Smith, Robert E.

1955 Ceramic Sequence at Uaxactun, Guatemala (2 volumes). Middle American Research Institute Publication 20. Tulane University.

TING, Carmen

2008 Reconsidering ceramic technology: a technological study of the Terminal Classic Ahk'utu' moulded-carved vases from Altun Ha, Belize. Unpublished MSc thesis. Institute of Archaeology, University College London, London.

TING, Carmen and Christophe HELMKE

2013 Technology, production and distribution of Terminal Classic molded-carved vases in the central Maya lowlands. *Open Journal of Archaeometry* 1: 43-48.

TING, Carmen

2014 Change, continuity, and the Maya collapse: reconstructing the ceramic economy in the eastern Maya lowlands during the Classic to Postclassic transition. Unpublished PhD thesis. Institute of Archaeology, University College London, London.

TING, Carmen, GRAHAM, Elizabeth A. and Marcos MARTINÓN-TORRES

2014 Molding the 'Collapse': technological characterisation of the Terminal Classic Ahk'utu' molded-carved vases from Altun Ha, Belize. *Craft and Science: International Perspectives on Archaeological Ceramics*, edited by Marcos Martínón-Torres, pp. 53-63. Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation, Doha.

TING, Carmen, MARTINÓN-Torres, Marcos; GRAHAM, Elizabeth A. and Christophe HELMKE

2015 The production and exchange of moulded-carved ceramics and the 'Maya Collapse'. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 62: 15-26.

ZRAŁKA, Jarosław; HELMKE, Christophe; HERMES, Bernard; KOSZKUL, Wiesław; TING, Carmen; BISHOP, Ronald and Dorota BOJKOWSKA

2020 Political Alliances and Trade Connections Observed in the Ceramic Record of the Classic Period: The Perspective from the Maya Site of Nakum, Guatemala. *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 31 (2020), 461–475,

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