A Classic Maya polychrome tripod plate from the Museo Popol Vuh

Apart from artifacts exhibited in the Museo Popol Vuh, Guatemala City, the museum keeps numerous artifacts of the Classic Maya culture in its depository, such as various ceramic vessels or sculpture. Since most of these objects were plundered by discreet looters their places of origin usually remain a secret. In March 1998 mexicon staff member Karl Herbert Mayer visited the Museo Popol Vuh and its depository. He was allowed to take photographs of several polychrome ceramic vessels of which one piece can now be published for the first time with the kind permission of the Museo Popol Vuh.

The artifact is a Classic Maya polychrome tripod plate of unknown provenance, referred by the museum as n° 0451. It is 24.5 cm in diameter and 6 cm high. In general the plate is not intensely damaged, but slight scratches overlay the surface without affecting the fineness of the iconography and hieroglyphic text painted in the tondo. On the right a discoloured area at the inner flaring wall interrupts the homogeneous orange coloration of the plate. The undercoat is orange, the circular hieroglyphic text and the rim are painted black, the figure in the centre is painted in a dark red.

The red-painted central figure depicts the head of the deity K’awil, characterized by three double-flames shooting up through his forehead, his jaw and his occiput – the mirror-sign on his forehead is another attribute of this deity. K’awil’or God K was an important deity associated with the royal descent in Classic Maya iconography and so scepters held by rulers were images of K’awil. Possibly the red God K on this plate can be associated with the latter aspect of this important deity. For a similar illustration of God K compare a ceramic vessel [Kerr 1792] published by Justin Kerr (1989: 113) or another polychrome plate published by Coe (1973: 36).

A large portion of the circular hieroglyphic text consists of glyphs belonging to the Primary Standard Sequence (PSS). This formulaic hieroglyphic sequence appears in order to mention the dedication of the object, the kind of content and the owner of the object. Our text begins with the so-called “Initial Sign” whose reading and exact translation is still problematic. The following glyph is an allograph of the so called “flat-hand” hieroglyph whose linguistic equivalent is still under discussion. Its semantic meaning may be “to dedicate”. In an article published in mexicon Barbara MacLeod (1989) proposed the decipherment of the next hieroglyph to be yi-chi “his (writing) surface”. The text continues with a strange writing variant of a glyph which often substitutes for tz’ibal “his writing, painting”. Specifically on this plate the human head, elsewhere read as ahaw “ruler”, seems to adopt the phonetic value in order to express the ergative pronoun n “his, her, its”. Thereafter, the owner of this plate is spelled ma-ko ahaw la-tzuk. This provides the information that a noble person, called mak ahaw, was the owner of this plate. Unfortunately there is no external information available about this mak ahaw from other sources. The last glyph, la-tzuk, may be a title. The complete text can be paraphrased as: “… it is dedicated the surface for the writing of mak ahaw [title]”.

The coloration and the hieroglyphic text of the plate is similar to other ceramic vessels from the northern Peten region, for instance an orange ceramic bowl published in the exhibition catalogue “Die Welt der Maya” (Eggebrecht, Eggebrecht & Grube 1992:384 – n° 75). The orange coloration and the blackened rim are identical with the style found on this plate. The shape and coloration of the tripod plate under discussion show some similarities to Tepeu I tripod ceramics from Uaxactun, as discussed by Smith in his analysis of Uaxactun ceramic vessels (Smith 1955). Tepeu I is dated between 550–700 A.D. (Sharer 1994: 691).

Photograph: Karl Herbert Mayer, 1998
Text: Christian Prager

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