

The Term “Lima Bean Vessel” in the Classic Mayan Lexicon

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A few years ago, Alexandre Tokovinine published convincing arguments for the identification of a logograph **IB** representing the word “lima bean” (2014). He suggested that the newly identified word sign is the character T709 classified in Eric Thompson’s catalog of Maya hieroglyphs (1962) (Figure 1). However, the Text Database and Dictionary of Classic Mayan project’s recent revision and emendation of Thompson’s catalog has shown that the graph deciphered by Tokovinine is not T709 or “ink”, but rather another graph that Thompson did not include in his inventory. Martha Macri and MatthewLooper also do not distinguish between the two signs, listing both under the designation YGA (2003:370) (Figure 1).

According to Thompson’s original index cards which have been made available to the project, the so-called “gray cards” (Figure 2), the sign for the word “ink” is classified under the nomenclature 709. Proposed readings of this graph by Nikolai Grube (1994) and David Stuart (2012) are **SABAK**, **YABAK**, **ABAK** and **SIBIK**.

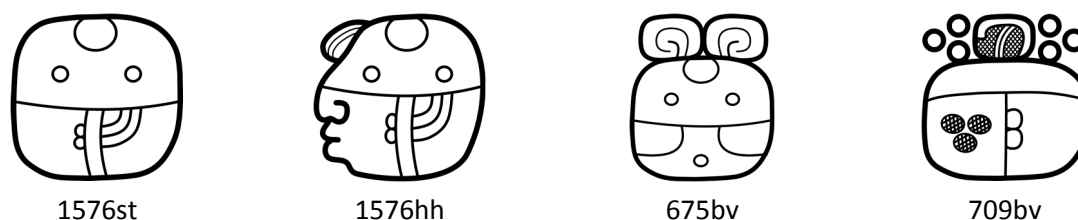


Figure 1. The standard (st) and portrait form (hh) of IB “lima bean” (1576st and 1576hh), the variant 675bv (bipartite vertical) and the standard form of the glyph representing “ink” (709bv). Drawings by Christian Prager / Text Database and Dictionary of Classic Mayan.

We have therefore reclassified the “lima bean” hieroglyph and assigned it the new label 1576, following Thompson’s system (Figure 1). We also introduced a new classification to designate the portrait form of the sign 1576 under the label 1576hh (“head human”). In a 1994 manuscript, Nikolai Grube presented various contexts that prove that Maya scribes interchanged the two signs due to their similarity and sometimes used sign 1576 to write the word “ink”. Furthermore, he proved that sign

675 substitutes for 1576 when used as the month patron for Pax (Figure 3). A few years ago, this observation was taken up again by Christophe Helmke and further developed (2013). While Helmke suggested that the hieroglyphic expression of this month patron could be interpreted as the term *sabakte'*, Tokovinine's decipherment now allows us to read it as *ibte'* or *ibalte'* "bean tree" (Tokovinine 2014:14). To conclude, Grube's earlier and Helmke's and Tokovinine's more recent studies reveal that there were at least three different signs that denoted either "lima bean" or "ink", respectively. We consider this fact in our revised catalogue and thus use three different nomenclatures to distinguish them: graphs 675 and 1576 for **IB** "lima bean" and graph 709 for "ink".

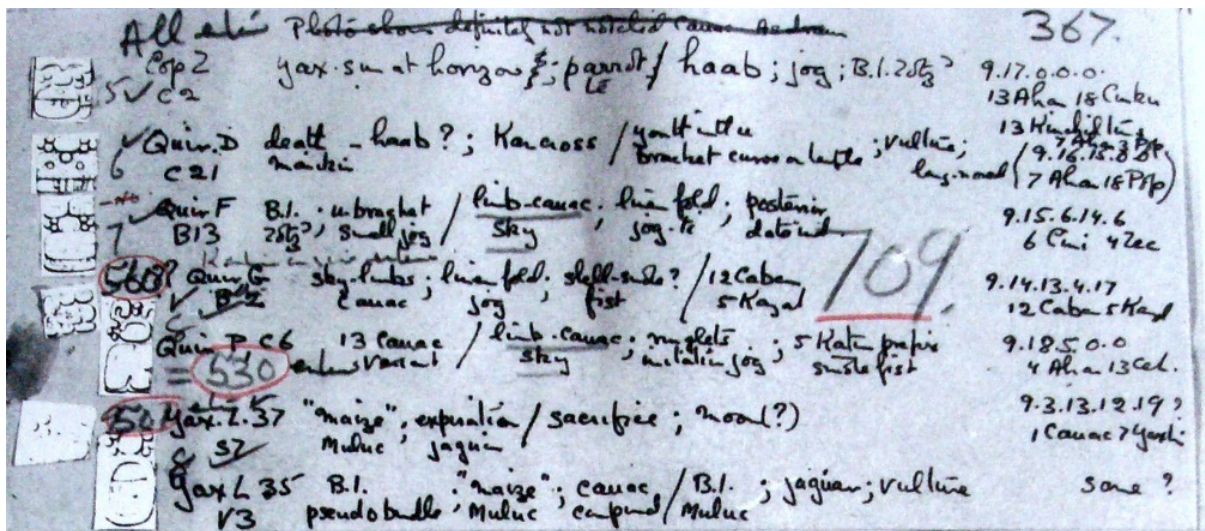


Figure 2. Image of sheet 367 from Eric Thompson's original "gray cards" with examples for the character T709 (copyright not evaluated).

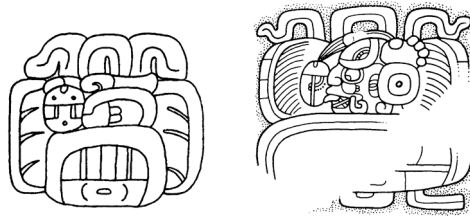


Figure 3. Variants of the patron of the month Pax or *ibte'* "Bean Tree": substitution between the compound 675bv.87bv and 1576st.1087st (image quote from Helmke 2013:fig. 4).

According to Tokovinine's paper (2014), the main arguments in support of the **IB** decipherment are full phonetic renderings *i-bi-li*, preposed *i-IB*, and postponed phonetic complementation *IB-bi*. Furthermore, the icon of sign 1576 corresponds to the image of a whole or partial bean plant. Here I present an additional, previously unpublished context that supports Tokovinine's decipherment, on a shallow bowl that was recently offered for sale by Millon Drouot in Paris on December 1, 2018, from the collection of Arturo Aguinaga (Drouot 2018:Lot 69) (Figure 4). According to the images provided by the auction house, the bowl is well-preserved and has an outward-flaring wall and a flat base, and measures 5.5 cm in height and 15.5 cm in diameter (Millon Drouot 2018:Lot 69). It is painted in the so-called Codex Style. The rim is red and the cream-coloured painted exterior of the bowl displays stylized and personified bean plants with hieroglyphic inscriptions painted in black. Based on stylistic and epigraphic content, the vessel can be assigned to the period between AD 672 and 830 and attributed to the Nakbé region (Drouot 2018:Lot 69).



Figure 4. Still image of the “Lima Bean Vessel” and rollout of the exterior displaying the hieroglyphic text and images of personified beans (copyrighted photographs by Virginie Rouffignac, 2018).

The bowl is painted with a short hieroglyphic inscription and floral iconography. The text is divided into two text fields containing a total of four readable hieroglyphic blocks, two in each field, framed by floral motives. The inscription names the owner of the vessel and provides information about its original use as container for beans.





A1	B1	C1	D1
			
17st.[1576st:24st] ¹	683bh.17st	[32dh:520st].[606st:521st]	58st.[57st:539st]
yi . [IB:li]	ja.yi	[K'UH:cha]. [TAN:WINIK]	SAK . [si:WAY]
yi-IB-li	ja-yi	K'UH cha-TAN WINIK	SAK WAY-si
<i>y-ib-il-∅</i>	<i>jaay</i>	<i>k'uh chata[h]n winik</i>	<i>sak wa[h]y-is</i>
it [is] his 'bean'-y	clay bowl	Chatahn Lord (Title)	Sak Wahyis (Title)

Figure 5. Analysis of the hieroglyphic inscription (copyrighted photographs by Virginie Rouffignac, 2018).

The inscription contains a short dedicatory text and identifies the owner by his titles only, rather than by a personal name. The titles *k'uh chatahn* and *sak wayhis* (C1-D1) associate him with the region encompassing Calakmul, Uxul and La Corona, where these titles often occur (Martin 2017; Grube et al. 2012:21-25). The dish is further labelled as **ja-yi** or *jaay* or “clay bowl” (B1), a term first deciphered by the late Alfonso Lacadena (1997). According to the text, the bowl originally must have served as container for lima beans, as suggested by the introductory compound **yi-IB-li** or *y-ib-il*. Block A1 clearly exhibits the logograph **IB**. The prevocalic form of the third-person singular ergative pronoun (*y-*) provides further support for Tokovinine’s decipherment of **IB** as “lima bean”.

¹ Numeric codes according to the standards set by J. Eric S. Thompson (1962) with corrections and emendations by the project. Sign variants are indicated by a two-letter code appended to the numeric code (Prager and Gronemeyer 2016).

The inscription on this clay bowl also hints that it may have been used to serve a particular bean dish. Recently, David Stuart published a short note about an inscription on a similar bowl in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (2016) (Figure 6). The respective dedicatory text reads **yi-chi-li ja-ya** and is followed by the name of the owner, a young lord from the Eastern Petén region. According to Stuart, the compound **yi-chi-li ja-ya** is best analyzed as *y-ich-il jaay* “his chili vessel”. In the same note, Stuart also refers to a sherd from Calakmul which exhibits the compound **i-chi-li ja-ya** for *ich-il jaay*. Stuart explains that the addition of the *-VI* suffix in *ichil* may either derive an adjective from the root noun or another noun meaning “chili sauce”, the latter being attested in Colonial Yukatek: <icil> “salsa con chile y caldo con chile y carne y cualquier guisado assi” (Ciudad Real 1984:221v); thus, *ichil jaay* could be interpreted as “(it is) a chili vessel” or “(it is) a chili sauce(?) vessel”. The suffix *-il* in the word *y-ib-il* recorded on the auctioned bowl presented here seems to be the same suffix that Stuart (2016) previously identified for *ichil* “chili sauce”. Accordingly, the suffix *-il* would alter the meaning from *ib* “lima bean” to *ibil* “lima bean paste”, possibly some kind of Classic Maya “baked beans”, or a predecessor of “frijoles refritos”.

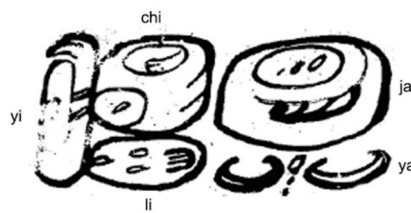


Figure 6. The term *ichil jaay* “chili vessel” on a shallow bowl, collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Accession no. 1988.1264. Image and concept by David Stuart (2016).

The bowl’s main textual and pictorial theme is clearly beans. The pictorial area is most likely embellished with a rendition of a personified lima bean (Figure 4). Many objects in Maya art, such as natural features, artefacts or plants, are given faces. The scene here shows a personified or zoomorphic bean plant coughing up an elongated, speckled object that has the typical characteristics of a lima bean (*Phaseolus lunatus*). It thus raises the question of how we should understand emic concepts of plant growth or fruit formation among the Classic Maya. This representation of a living plant as an animal-like creature regurgitating a fruit from its gaping snout as kind of visual birth metaphor could provide preliminary clues to such concepts. Such an image of a plant emanating its seed has far-reaching implications and will be the subject of a separate article.

This research note, in sum, has proven that the Classic Maya used bowls in which beans were prepared and probably served as food, and designated some ceramics for this purpose with glyphic tags. With the identification of the term *ibil jaay* for “lima bean vessel”, we recover not only an emic name for such a vessel, but also a new entry for the dictionary of Classic Mayan.

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