



FURTHER NOTES ON THE INITIAL SIGN AS /ALAY/

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The decipherment of the "Initial Sign" in the Primary Standard Sequence (Coe 1973; henceforth PSS) or dedicatory formula has been a long process.¹ It was not until the year 2000 that Barbara MacLeod and Yuriy Polyukhovich independently deciphered this sign as *alay* "here; this (one)".² They based their decipherment on the frequent syllabic complementation of different main signs with '**a-**', '**-la-**', and '**-ya**'. In May of 2003 I identified a fully syllabic version of the "Initial Sign" spelled '**a-la-ya**' on Kerr No. 8123 (Figure 2),³ which led to a short essay on the decipherment of the sign as *alay* as well as a quantitative and distributional analysis of the variants of the "Initial Sign" contained in 368 PSS texts within a corpus of over 470 (Boot 2003). In this essay I present two examples of the "Initial Sign" in which the phonetic complement **-la-** is infixed into the prefixed syllabic sign for '**a**'.

¹ In this essay the following orthography will be employed: *;* *a*, *b'*, *ch*, *ch'*, *e*, *h*, *j*, *i*, *k*, *k'*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *o*, *p*, *p'*, *s*, *t*, *t'*, *tz*, *tz'*, *u*, *w*, *x*, and *y*. In this orthography the /h/ represents a glottal aspirate or glottal voiced fricative (/h/ as in English "house"), while /j/ represents a velar aspirate or velar voiced fricative (/j/ as in Spanish "joya") (Grube 2004). In this essay there is no reconstruction of complex vowels based on disharmonic spellings (compare to Houston, Stuart, and Robertson 1998 and Lacadena and Wichmann 2004, n.d.; for counter proposals see Kaufman 2003 and Boot 2004, 2005). In the transcription of Maya hieroglyphic signs uppercase bold type face letters indicate logograms (e.g. **LAY**), while lowercase bold type face letters indicate syllabic signs (e.g. **la**). Items placed between square brackets are so-called infixed signs; the order of the transcribed signs indicates the epigraphically established reading order (e.g. '**a**[**la**]'). Queries added to sign identifications or transcribed values express doubt on the identification of the assigned logographic or syllabic value (e.g. **LAY?**). All reconstructions (i.e. transliterations) in this essay are approximations of the original intended Classic Maya ("epigraphic") linguistic items (Boot 2002: 6-7). Citing of so-called T-numbers (e.g. T534) refers to the hieroglyphic signs as numbered and catalogued by Thompson (1962; complete sign list online at www.famsi.org/mayawriting/thompson/index.html).

² Their full epigraphic and linguistic argument has been presented at the 2005 Texas Maya Meetings, the illustrations of which appear in the 2005 source book (MacLeod and Polyukhovich 2005).

³ Those students who have made a comparison of the original image of Kerr No. 8123 as posted by Justin Kerr and the later image will have noticed differences in both iconography and some of the hieroglyphic texts due to overpainting/restoration. Fortunately, the "Initial Sign" escaped that faith.

Within a corpus of currently over 600 different PSS texts (and growing in number) there are actually three examples in which the “Initial Sign” is written **‘a[la]-LAY?** or **‘a[la]-LAY?-ya**. Unfortunately I have at present no permission to illustrate one example, as it is found on a vessel in a private collection.



Figure 1: Kerr No. 8123, a) Rollout Photograph by Justin Kerr, b) Detail of the “Initial Sign” spelled **‘a-la-ya** (high resolution image by Justin Kerr)

The first example can be found in the PSS on Kerr No. 1211, a well-known Late Classic Maya vessel. It has been illustrated on several occasions (e.g. Clarkson 1978: Fig. 1; Coe 1982: No. 58; Robicsek and Hales 1981: Vessel 55) (Figure 2a-b). Unfortunately, large part of the body of the vessel is damaged by erosion. Subsequently also a large part of the rim text is eroded. Fortunately, the opening section of three collocations of the PSS has not suffered too much erosion and can be easily identified, following the original nicknames by Coe (1973), as “Initial Sign”, “Step”, and “Fire Quincunx”.

The “Initial Sign” on Kerr No. 1211 shows an interesting composition (Figure 2c-d). The main sign is formed by the full version (T1017) of the T24 MIRROR/CELT sign,⁴ common to many variants of the “Initial Sign”. This main sign is prefixed by the syl-

⁴ I take the T24 MIRROR/CELT sign to be a part of the T1017 GOD.HEAD sign. To employ a part (T24) is to refer to the whole (T1017). This is an example of *pars pro toto* writing in the Maya script, of which several examples can be identified (Boot n.d.).

labic sign 'a in which one can identify an infixed T534 **la** syllabic sign. This "Initial Sign" clearly reads 'a[la]-LAY?-ya.

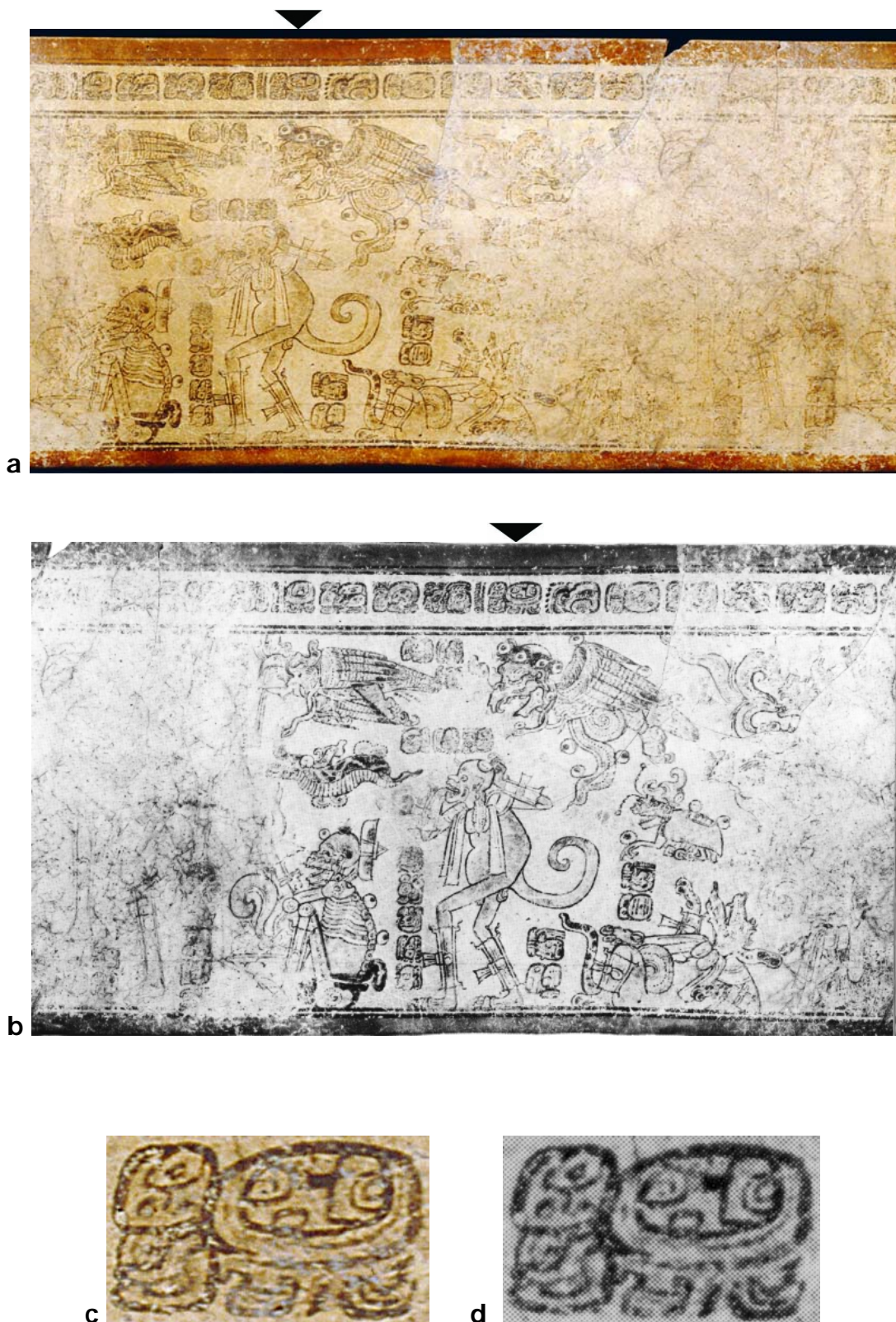


Figure 2: Kerr No. 1211, a) High Resolution Color Rollout Photograph by Justin Kerr, b) Black-and-White Rollout Photograph by Justin Kerr (after Coe 1982: No. 58), c) "Initial Sign" in Color (high resolution), d) "Initial Sign" in Black-and-White



Figure 3: Vessel at the Rietberg Museum, Zürich, Switzerland (RMA 314), a) Color Still Photograph (after Eggebrecht and Eggebrecht 1992: No. 83), b) Black-and-White Still Photograph (after Haberland 1971: No. 62), c) Two High Resolution Color Scans (by the author), d) High Resolution Black-and-White Scan (by the author)

This particular spelling variant is very rare in Maya hieroglyphic writing and to my knowledge has not been identified in previous epigraphic research. The example on Kerr No. 1211 is, however, not unique. The second example can be found on a Late Classic Maya vessel now part of the collection at the Museum Rietberg in Zürich, Switzerland (Figure 3).

The vessel at the Rietberg Museum, Zürich, is a tall cylindrical polychrome vessel. Along the rim one can find a well-painted PSS which survives in good condition. Also this PSS opens with an intriguing variant of the "Initial Sign". The main sign is a variant of the common G1 portrait head (T1011), employed in a large percentage of variants of the "Initial Sign" (Boot 2003: 2-5). This G1 portrait head is prefixed with an

an 'a sign which is also infixed with T534 **la**. As such also this "Initial Sign" can be transcribed as 'a[**la**]-LAY? for *alay* "here; this (one)".

The two illustrated spelling variants (of three identified), in which the prefixed syllabic sign 'a is infixed with T534 **la**, provide important examples of phonetic complementation which further substantiate the decipherment of the "Initial Sign" as *alay* as independently proposed by Barbara MacLeod and Yuriy Polyukhovich. Future research may identify more of these rare spelling variants.

Acknowledgments

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