



# Earliest Jester God Found at K'o, Guatemala

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*Precolumbia Mesoweb Press*

In July, 2008, archaeologists dug through the floor of a residential structure at the site of K'o, Guatemala, and encountered what turned out to be the circular lid of an underground storage chamber (*chultun*) (Figures 1–3). Lifting the lid revealed that the *chultun* was divided into two main chambers, the eastern one of which was empty (Figure 4). The western chamber contained an interment

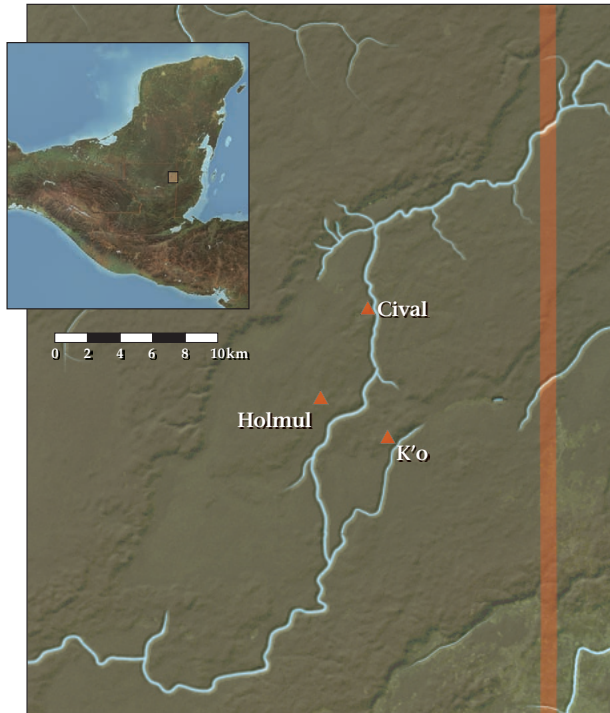
accompanied by elaborate grave goods. Multiple lines of evidence indicate it to be a high-status burial, one of the earliest in the Maya Lowlands.

K'o is a medium-sized ceremonial center located on the edge of the Jobal *bajo* to the southeast of the better-known and larger site of Holmul (Estrada-Belli 2009:viii). John Tomasic has conducted intensive research at K'o from 2005–2008 (Tomasic 2005, 2008). At the 2011 meetings of the Society for American Archaeology, he and Steven

2011 Earliest Jester God Found at K'o, Guatemala. *Mesoweb*: [www.mesoweb.com/reports/EarliestJesterGod.pdf](http://www.mesoweb.com/reports/EarliestJesterGod.pdf).



**Figure 1.** The site of K'o in its regional context (map courtesy Precolumbia Mesoweb Press).

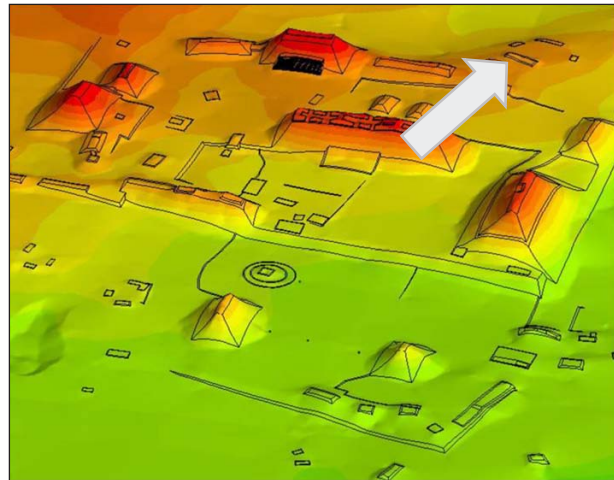


**Figure 2.** K'o and its neighbors Holmul and Cival (map courtesy Precolumbia Mesoweb Press).

Bozarth presented their initial analysis of the sub-floor burial.

The interred individual lay in an extended position on his back with his body oriented toward the south (Figure 5). Seven burial vessels were placed near the upper portion of the body, with an eighth vessel positioned next to the western wall. Intriguingly, the skull and mandible of the K'o individual were found between a pair of vessels placed rim-to-rim, in the manner of many Preclassic and Early Classic lip-to-lip caches. The position of the skull and mandible were consistent with the hypothesis that the deceased's head was placed between the cache vessels while still articulated with the body (Figure 7).

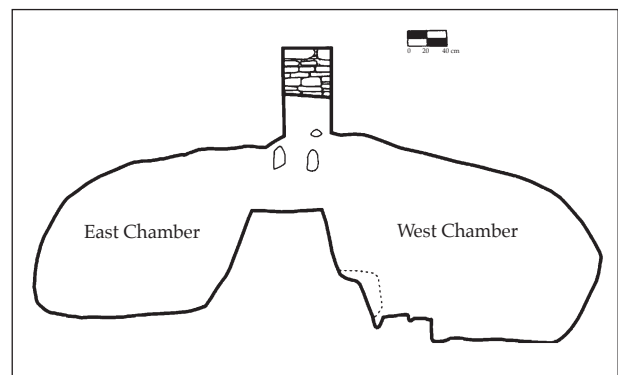
A sample of bone from the burial was submitted for radiocarbon dating and yielded a date of



**Figure 3.** The site core of K'o viewed from the north, with the burial site highlighted in the southernmost structure of Patio Group 4.

2169BP  $\pm$ 46. Calibration resulted in a 1-Sigma (68.3%) range of 357–284 BC, 256–247 BC, 234–166 BC, with the majority of the probability falling within 357–284 BC. This roughly corresponds to the transition between the Middle Preclassic and Late Preclassic periods (350–300 BC).

The ceramic vessels in the tomb were analyzed by Michael Callaghan and stylistically dated to the Late Middle Preclassic and Late Preclassic (Table 1, Figure 6). In their SAA presentation, Tomasic and Bozarth described three scenarios to account



**Figure 4.** Cross-section of the *chultun*.

**Table 1: Ceramic Analysis**

Vessel 1	Sierra Red jar	Late Preclassic
Vessel 2	Joventud Red jar	Late Middle Preclassic
Vessel 3	Sierra Red plate	Late Preclassic
Vessel 4	Sierra Red plate	Late Preclassic
Vessel 5	Deprecio Incised vessel	Late Middle Preclassic
Vessel 6	Sapote Striated vessel	Late Middle Preclassic or Late Preclassic
Vessel 7	Sierra Red bowl	Late Preclassic





Figure 5. The K'o burial.



**Figure 6.** Ceramic vessels from the burial.



**Figure 7.** The skull and mandible revealed by the removal of the top vessel of the lip-to-lip pair.





**Figure 8.** The modeled censer. The photograph in *a* shows the two pairs of holes for hanging.

for this mixture of ceramics from different time periods. In the first scenario, the individual was buried during the Late Middle Preclassic and then the tomb was reentered in the Late Preclassic and vessels from that time period were added to the offerings. Tomasic and Bozarth are inclined to rule out this scenario on the grounds that the skull and mandible of the deceased were found between two Late Preclassic vessels.

The second scenario features a Late Preclassic burial in which heirloom vessels from the earlier time period were left among the offerings. But this scenario is inconsistent with the radiocarbon

dating of the bone sample, which falls within the transitional period immediately before the Late Preclassic. Thus the third scenario is the most probable: that the burial dates to the transition between the Late Middle Preclassic and the Late Preclassic. This makes it one of the earliest high-status burials yet recorded for the Maya Lowlands.

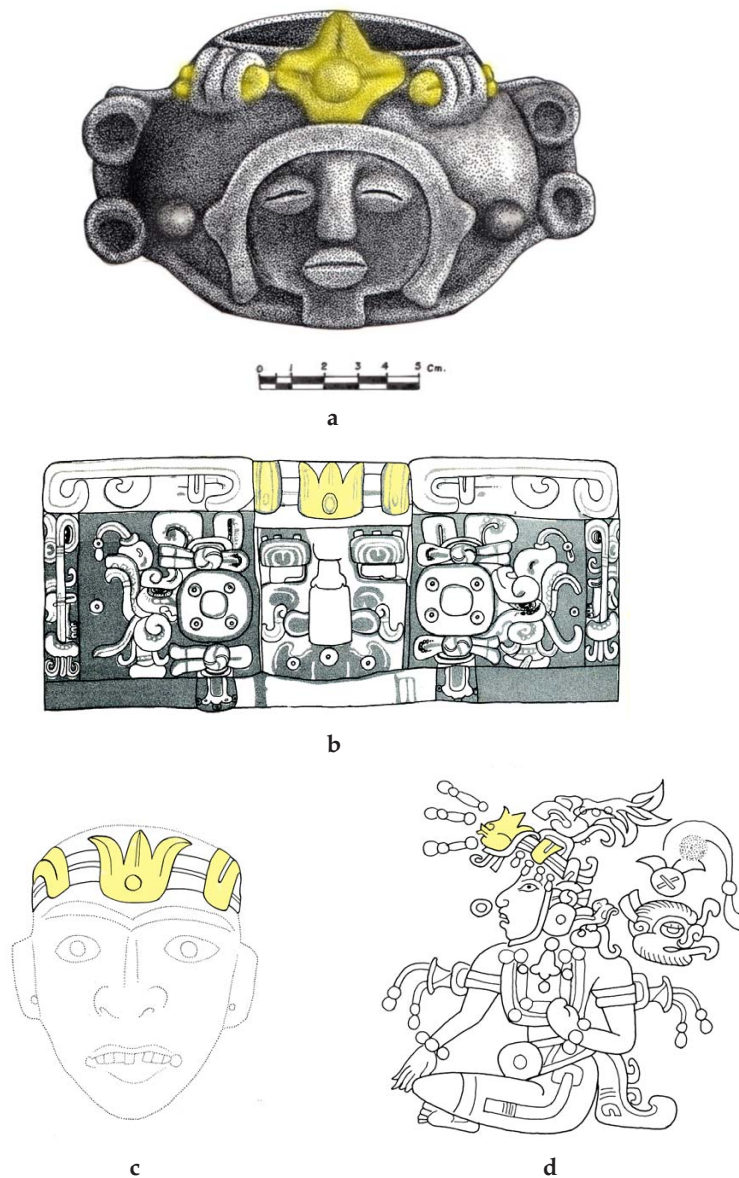
The eighth ceramic vessel found in the tomb is by far the most interesting. A black-slipped, modeled censer, it has two pairs of holes in the rim and lid, suggesting that it was suspended by ropes like an incense burner in a Christian church (Figure 8). In their iconographic interpretation of the

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appliqué elements decorating the censer, Tomasic and Bozarth identify the central brow piece above the face as a Preclassic “Jester God” headband ornament (for the Jester God see Freidel 1990; Freidel and Schele 1988; Stuart 2011; Taube 1998, 2005). In the Preclassic period, the trefoil Jester God motif was often flanked by two cleft elements (Figure 9). Karl Taube (personal communication to John Tomasic, 2011) agrees that the brow piece is a form of the Jester God, specifically a star-shaped variant also seen on the West Wall at San Bartolo

(Taube et al. 2010:Figure 59).

For the relationship in the Preclassic period between the Jester God and royalty, Tomasic and Bozarth point to an accession scene in the West Wall mural of San Bartolo in which the acceding individual, either a deity or a historical ruler (Taube et al. 2010:62-63), is presented with a headdress marked with the trefoil form of the Jester God (Figure 10). In future publications Tomasic will explore the possible associations of the Jester God variant at K'o.



**Figure 9.** Jester God with flanking cleft elements: (a) censer from the K'o tomb; (b) facade mask of Cerros Structure 5c-2<sup>nd</sup> (drawing by Linda Schele); (c) Tikal Burial 85 greenstone masquette (after Coe 1966:Fig. 10); (d) unprovenienced jade pectoral in Dumbarton Oaks collection (drawing by Simon Martin).



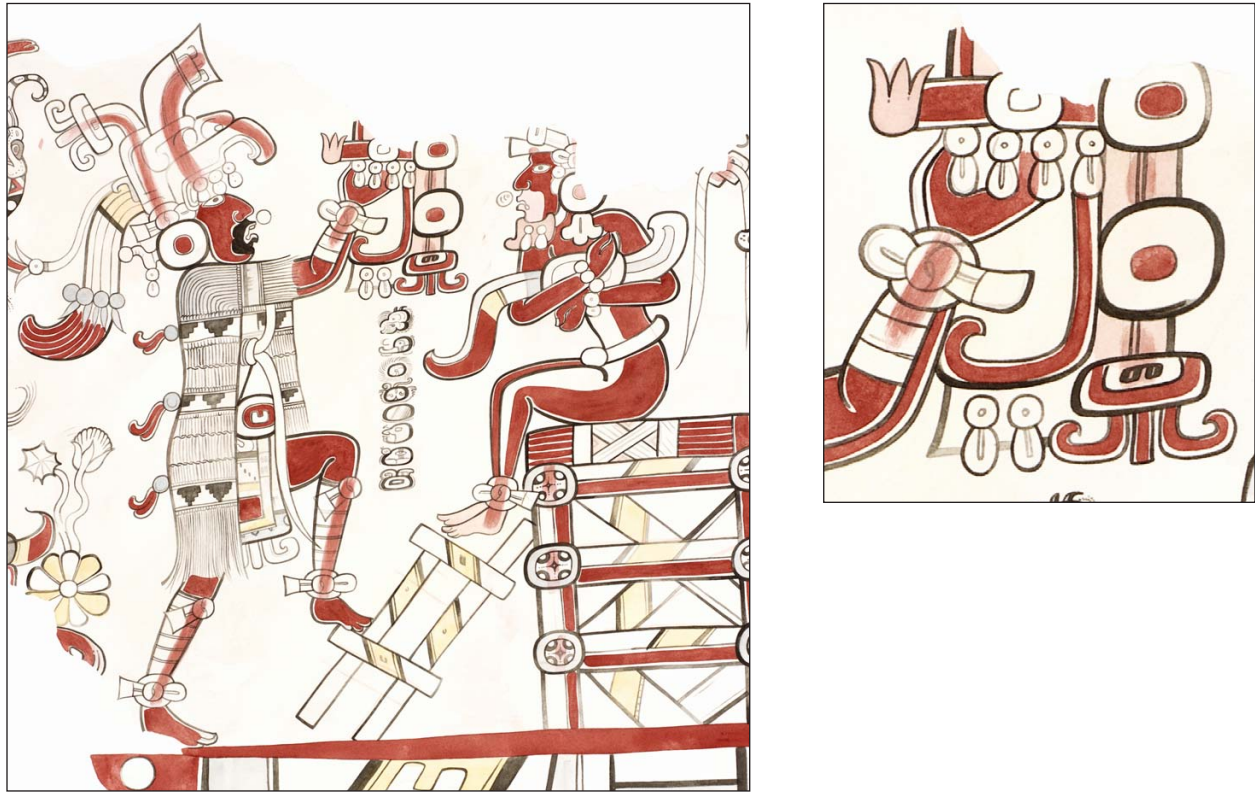


Figure 10. San Bartolo West Wall accession scene with presentation of headdress with trefoil Jester God. Detail of a rendering by Heather Hurst.

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