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Ancient Maya Writing and Calligraphy

Michael D. Coe

Maya hieroglyphic writing was carved on stone monuments, written in bark-paper codices, and painted or carved upon funerary pottery. The stone inscriptions, formerly thought to record only calendrical information, have been found to contain dynastic histories. The codices treat exclusively of ritual matters, while the texts and pictures on the pottery are concerned with the perilous voyage of the soul to the underworld. The script evolved from a highly pictographic system into one that had a strong phonetic-syllabic component. As calligraphy, Maya writing was a basically painterly art.

Of all the native peoples of the New World before the arrival of the Spaniards, the Maya of southern Mexico and Central America were alone in being fully literate. Many of these records have survived more than a thousand years to tell of a way of life that has vanished forever. Archaeologists, who are usually left with little more than the pots, pans, weapons, and other material goods of ancient cultures, assure us that the dead do not speak, and thus assume that the mental life that has gone without trace played little or no part in that culture. In the case of the Maya, like that of the Egyptians, the dead most certainly *do* speak, but they tell us of a mental world that is often completely alien to our own. It is this unique glimpse into the minds of a gifted people that makes the study of the ancient Maya so fascinating to the scholar.

The Maya civilization flourished in the midst of a tropical forest between the end of the third century after Christ and the Spanish conquest, but its greatest period, the Classic, was over by about 900. At that point in time, some enormous and as yet little understood catastrophe overwhelmed the Maya of the southern lowlands, although during the next six centuries the northern lowlands—that is, Yucatán—remained prosperous even though under sporadic domination from the Mexican highlands.

Let us consider the Classic, since it was during that period that all of the Maya inscriptions were carved. It was the Classic that saw the greatest flowering of Maya art and architecture. The word "city" has often been used in talking about the largest Maya sites—such as Tikal, Palenque, Copán, and Piedras Negras—yet these agglomerations of towering temple-pyramids, palaces, and courtyards show little signs of planning, and there are no streets. Instead, houses were scattered helter-skelter across the landscape, although there are more of them the closer one gets to the center of a site. Most archaeologists, then, prefer to think of these as ceremonial centers, inhabited by politicians and priests and their retinues, with the bulk of the Maya peasantry living in rural hamlets not much different from those one sees today in the Yucatán countryside.

There are probably hundreds of such centers of varying degrees of size and importance across the Maya lowlands, most of them lost from sight under the jungle canopy that covers the area. What really were these centers, so reminiscent of Angkor and the Khmer civilization of Southeast Asia? So poor is our information that we are not even sure that the so-called "palaces" were actually used as dwellings. On the other hand, the temple-pyramids have begun to reveal some of their secrets. These are stucco-covered structures of limestone rubble faced with dressed blocks. The pyramid itself is stepped, with a frontal stairway giving access to a vaulted temple on the summit. In recent years, some extraordinary discoveries of richly stocked tombs have been made at the base of the substructure, making it certain that these were funerary temples built by a ruler to house his own remains upon death.

Who, then, might have been worshipped in a Maya temple? A god or the dead ruler for whom it was raised? Here we have an example of the false use of categories derived from our own culture, for in pre-hispanic Mexico and Central America these might have been one and the same. The rulers were descended from the gods, and a king probably became identified with his lineage god after death. By paying homage to the man, you were also paying homage to the god. Finely made masonry tombs lavishly equipped with grave goods have often been found beneath the floors of the palaces as well. In other words, an ancient Maya center might have been as much a necropolis for rulers and nobles as a seat for the Maya administration. This

peculiar ambiguity between life and death can be seen elsewhere in Maya culture.

The writing of the ancient Maya has given us our most valuable clues to their social, political, and religious life. Like their art, this writing is at the same time elegant, baroque, complex, and fundamentally weird. Maya texts were lavishly applied to stone, pottery, bone, shell, jade, and many other substances, but probably most importantly to folding-screen books manufactured from bark-paper and covered with stucco as a writing surface. There must have been thousands of such books in Classic times, but the only ones that we have today are a tiny handful of Post-Classic codices.

Maya hieroglyphs are obviously highly pictorial. At any rate, they must have begun their evolution, like our own alphabet, as pictures of real things. Very frequent among them appear the heads of humans and animals, shown in profile facing left. These and even more stylized signs are essentially rounded in form, rather like a compromise between an oval and a parallelogram. Because of these factors, the Maya calligrapher was basically a painter, and probably both professions were joined in the same man. This is reminiscent of China, of course. As in China, brush pens of various sizes were used. It is likely that for the relief carving of a text, the master calligrapher would first brush on the characters, the rest of the job being finished by the sculptor; in the case of carved pottery, the calligrapher himself may have incised the still-damp clay.

Just as in Oriental or Western manuscripts, there are schools of writing and even individual hands which can be detected. Some Maya calligraphers were amazingly sophisticated, employing at times a "running hand" which is not easy to read. Others, who generally seem to have been confined to pottery painting, were less adept.

What do these texts say? How are they to be read? In the last century, it was discovered that Maya writing is to be read from left to right, and top to bottom, usually in pairs of glyphs. It was also found that numbers were expressed by bars and dots, a dot having the value of one and a bar the value of five. Thus, "seven" would be written by a bar and two dots. A third symbol sufficed for zero. With this knowledge, and with information coming to us from the sixteenth-century Franciscan Bishop of Yucatán, Diego de Landa, the intricacies of the Maya calendar were worked out.



Figure 1. Sandstone stela from Quiriguá, Guatemala, representing a Maya ruler of the eighth century. On its sides is carved a text containing dynastic history. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University.



Figure 2. Stone lintel from Yaxchilán, Mexico. The Yaxchilán ruler "Shield Jaguar" faces a robed woman, perhaps his principal wife. The hieroglyphs between their heads record his name and titles.

It was found that many Maya hieroglyphs were, in fact, calendrical. On a typical Maya stela, for instance, or a wall panel, there is usually an initial date. Interspersed in the text are often several other dates, to be calculated forward, or sometimes backwards, from the initial date. Among the majority of scholars working on the problem, a very odd notion took hold, one that, if verified, would have made the Maya completely different from every other human civilization of which we have knowledge. According to this idea, the Maya worshipped time itself, each time period being deified. The content of the non-calendrical glyphs would have been little more than a kind of commentary upon this chronological religion, with possible astrological phenomena like eclipses thrown in for good measure.

The inscriptions on stone are usually accompanied by scenes of persons engaged in various activities. Although many of them are clearly in battle dress and are trampling and otherwise mistreating captives, it was said that these were figures of the priests who were supposed to have ruled the Maya. There are also figures wearing skirts or robes, and these also were supposed to have been priests. The usual conclusion was that the Maya were a theocracy dedicated to the worship of chronology.

This hypothetical edifice began crumbling in 1958, when Heinrich Berlin published a study showing that each important Maya center had its own "emblem glyph," a special symbol which was peculiar to it and which he suggested might be its name or the name of the reigning dynasty. He further hazarded that the Maya inscriptions might not be talking primarily of theological matters, but rather that they were recording history. This, of course, was a heresy.

The Berlin heresy was compounded two years later, when a now-classic paper by Tatiana Proskouriakoff appeared in the pages of *American Antiquity*. Proskouriakoff, who many years before had been artist on the University of Pennsylvania expedition to Piedras Negras, on the Usumacinta River in Guatemala, took as her subject matter a large number of stelae from that major center. She was able to show by an analysis of the dates and other glyphs carved on them, that these reliefs grouped themselves into twelve series. The interval from the first date in any one series to the last date was no longer than the normal range of a human lifetime. Her conclusion was that each series recorded not chronological hocus-pocus, but the reign of a

particular ruler, including references to his birth, accession, and death, and containing information on his marriage and the birth of heirs. In other papers Proskouriakoff demonstrated that the robed figures in Classic Maya art were, in fact, women, and worked out the dynastic history of two extremely violent rulers of Yaxchilán.

All subsequent work on the inscriptions has reinforced the Berlin-Proskouriakoff approach; namely, that the subject matter of the Maya reliefs and the texts which accompany them are historical records having to do not with occult, theocratic matters, but with the everyday, hurly-burly politics of primitive states with warlike rulers hellbent on including other Maya states within their sphere of influence. This is the secular point of view, and it cannot be denied that most Maya texts treat of such matters, which throw an entirely new light on ancient Maya society and politics. As an excellent example of the insights which have come from this great breakthrough, it can be shown that the giant among Maya centers, Tikal in northern Guatemala, had some degree of control over many other centers, since the Tikal emblem glyph is spread over a wide area. The most probable explanation is that through a combination of military might and judicious marrying-off of younger daughters to lesser leaders, the Tikal kings were able to control most if not all of the southern Maya lowlands.

Now, this secular theory makes the Maya, heretofore buried in a world of mumbo-jumbo, much more believable. They sound very much like other early civilizations in the world, with their stories of conquests, humbling of captives, royal marriages, and royal descent. Certainly, the chronological hypothesis cannot be further entertained.

Yet, puzzles do remain. It is certain that the Classic Maya were lunar astrologers, since several glyphs describing the phase of the moon and other selenine matters follow the initial date on a monument, so that whatever the matter described, the influence of the moon upon it was extremely important. And not all Maya initial dates can be ascribed to temporal rulers. Heinrich Berlin and David Kelley have separately demonstrated that at Palenque, the most beautiful of all Maya sites, the texts fall into three groups. The latest group obviously deals with contemporary rulers and their actions. An earlier group refers to ancestral kings who seem to have been historical. But the earliest group of all falls at the end of the last



Figure 3. Stone panel from Bonampak, a small center under the domination of Yaxchilán. The seated ruler is receiving the homage of his wives. The delicately carved inscription gives female names and titles, and is an excellent example of the painterly character of Classic Maya calligraphy.

creation, when the gods themselves appeared; three of the Palenque temples have been identified by their texts with the birth of highly significant Maya deities.

There was a single, unified, body of thought in Mesoamerica—Mexico and Central America—which we would call a Mesoamerican religion. This religion, which almost certainly goes back to the Olmec civilization of 3,000 years ago, has many features which it shares with the early mental systems of eastern Asia. Basic to it is the idea of a universe oriented to seven directions. The surface of our own world has four of these directions, the cardinal points, at each of which stands a world tree. On top of each tree is a particular species of bird, and there is a definite color associated with the tree and direction; at the center is the green tree of abundance, standing for the fifth direction. Above the world is the “above” itself, a stratified realm of thirteen layers, each with its own god. Below the world are nine layered hells, each with its own god.

This universe had been initiated by an old male-female creator couple, and had been alternately produced and destroyed—four times, according to the Aztec—before our own creation. All of the gods were generated by the divine pair during these great epochs. Each god was complex, since not only did he (if male) have a consort, but was quadruple in that each aspect was assigned to one of the four color-directions on the surface. Some gods were at the same time diurnal *and* deities of the night sky. The sun itself died at the close of each day as it dipped below the western horizon, and became an invisible lord of the underworld in the guise of a fearsome jaguar. It was only the continued offering of the hearts and blood of brave men captured in war that would insure the rebirth of the sun each dawn.

The existing Maya books treat exclusively of this supernatural world, geared to the strange exigencies of their calendrical system. At the heart of the system is a cycle of 260 days, based upon the permutation of 13 numerals with 20 named days. Most of the content—textual and representational—of the codices concern the rituals associated with the gods and this 260-day calendar. It is clear that the main object of these books was to tell the Maya what the auguries—good, bad, or indifferent—were for each day in the cycle. The motions of the heavenly bodies, surely to be identified with certain Maya gods, were supremely important, above all the cosmic dance of the sun and

moon which results in solar and lunar eclipses, and the apparent cycle of the planet Venus.

It has been the books which have given us the surer clues as to the nature of the Maya writing system. While these all date to the Post-Classic period—that is, to the time between the breakup of the Classic Maya civilization around 900 and the Spanish cataclysm—they must preserve features characteristic of the ritual books of the Classic. In three of the four known codices, each item of text is associated with a picture, so that we have a unique chance to link writing with events. Unfortunately, decipherment has been very slow. At the beginning, shortly after the Conquest, the controversial Bishop Landa recorded a so-called “alphabet” which was rediscovered by Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg in the nineteenth century. For many years, this alleged “key” led exactly nowhere, leading most Maya experts to believe that there was, in fact, no real system involved, and that the Maya scribes had evolved nothing more than a thing of shreds and patches, a series of sad attempts at trying to record their own thoughts.

It is an irony of intellectual history that the breakthrough on the real decipherment of Maya writing has come not in the United States or England or Germany, which have had a near monopoly of Maya studies for the past century, but in Soviet Russia, by a scholar who claims to be inspired by Marxism-Leninism. Yuri V. Knorosov, a student of the evolution of writing systems who had specialized in the Egyptian script, re-examined the problem posed by the non-calendrical aspect of Maya writing, especially the codices. Instead of rejecting the infamous Landa “alphabet,” he accepted it as a much-flawed syllabary, an example of a system much like that of the Japanese who can write their own syllables by a sign representing a consonant followed by a vowel. When the Maya word was of the consonant-vowel-consonant sort, then, reasoned Knorosov, the Maya would have written it in such a way that the final vowel was understood as silent.

Of course, again like Japanese, there must be many ideographic signs in Maya without any purely phonetic value. It is the understanding of these which takes the longest time and greatest patience, for one reading does not necessarily lead to another. But that the Maya system had a strong phonetic-syllabic component which has been, in the main, correctly interpreted by Knorosov, is not doubted by many



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Figure 4. Late Classic polychrome vase from Chamá, Guatemala. Two richly garbed young men on the vessel almost certainly are the Hero Twins who descended to the underworld to conquer the Lords of Hell. The glyphic text, twice repeated, is a much truncated version of a long funerary text describing their macabre voyage. Photographs by Justin Kerr.

Figure 5. Shell pendant from Jaina. This is the personified form of the day Ahau, last day of the sacred calendar. Photograph by Justin Kerr.



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students of the subject. If the history of other writing systems is relevant here, then at first one would expect Maya hieroglyphs to have been mainly ideographic, with phoneticism increasing through time, and it is certain that the codices have more syllabic signs than do the earlier Classic inscriptions.

Now we are left with the pottery. It has been written by experts that the hieroglyphic writing on these magnificent objects was the product of persons who had only a haphazard knowledge of the style and content—whatever that might be—of the Maya script. In this, the experts can be shown to be wrong.

First of all, let some facts be stated about this pottery. In the debris of archaeological excavation, pictorial pottery (whether carved or painted) is so rare as to suggest that its presence in domestic refuse must be accidental. All great pictorial vases or bowls found by archaeologists have come from burials. So, whatever the initial motive for the production of these vessels, their ultimate fate was to accompany a corpse in its final resting place.

Secondly, the iconographic content of these pictorial pots is highly circumscribed, and obviously different from that which we find on relief carvings or in wall paintings such as those of Bonampak. On the great majority of vessels, the themes are limited to the following: (1) a lord seated on a throne engaged in conversation with underlings, (2) an old god in a shell, (3) two young lords who in appearance and attire are identical, (4) bat gods covered with death symbols. There are other themes, but it is possible to show that these are part of the same story.

Thirdly, the hieroglyphic text painted or carved on pottery vessels from the Classic Maya period is virtually identical in all cases, no matter from which part of the Maya area it comes. This gives lie to the unfounded notion that the calligraphers of pottery were ignorant of the text they were writing. The text begins with a verbal glyph (also known in the codices) which roughly means “his descent.” A road and death sign stands in the middle, while an epithet whose meaning is not yet understood is placed near the end. Between these are the heads of various gods, most of whom seem to be associated with death and the underworld.

The orthodox view of the wonderfully depicted personages and scenes on Maya pottery is that these illustrate the “real world” of the

lords and nobles in whose tombs they were placed. That is, following the usual materialistic explanations of American archaeologists, they were merely containers of food to insure that the deceased had the proper caloric intake in the next world, and that the pictures on them would have been for his entertainment in the here-and-now.

A careful examination of many of these scenes from the supposedly “real” world will disclose some disquieting features, however. Often all personages are painted black, with ashen faces. Death symbols occur with distressing frequency. To pilasters of what one would think was the royal palace are affixed faces of the Death God himself and the awesome features of the Jaguar Sun, the dead sun as it passes through the underworld after sunset. Torture and a prolonged suffering before death are occasionally stressed.

It is my own conclusion, following a suggestion made to me some years ago by the German scholar Thomas Barthel, that all Maya pottery which has pictorial content, with or without texts, is funerary by origin. These vessels—and there must have been tens of thousands of them—would comprise the Maya equivalent of the Book of the Dead of the ancient Egyptians. The ultimate theme is that of the death and resurrection of the lords of the Maya realm.

To fully understand what we are looking at in these vessels, we must turn to the *Popol Vuh*, sacred book of the Quiché Maya who were the rulers of much of the Maya highlands when the Spanish invasion took place. This is a priceless document, for the *Popol Vuh* gives us information on Mesoamerican origin cosmology and theogony which is only alluded to in our Aztec sources (usually so complete on occult subjects). The *Popol Vuh*, written in the Quiché language but in Spanish letters after the Conquest, is most likely a transliteration of a hieroglyphic original. Probably all of the ancient Maya were aware of its content.

The story it tells begins with the first moment of creation, and continues with the multiple worlds which existed before our own. At some point, most of the gods were produced, including a pair of Hero Twins who were fabulous hunters with the blowgun and great ball players. Their own father and uncle had been drawn down to the underworld by the lords of death and there slain forever. Now, it was their own turn, but they practiced a form of one-upmanship which cost their adversaries a loss of power. Then they defeated the death

gods in a magic ball game. The underworld was a place of chambers or caves, each of which was a house of horrors: a House of Darkness, a House of Knives, a House of Cold, a House of Bats, and so forth. The twins were told by the lords of the underworld, for instance, to stay all night in the House of Darkness and to continue smoking two cigars which they were given. This, of course, was an impossibility so they affixed fireflies to the tips of the cigars and cheated their fate.

Finally, one of them was beheaded by the killer bats. But in the end they triumphed, through the will of the council of heavenly gods. They reappeared as magicians in the courts of the subterranean rulers, and performed incredible feats of legerdemain which transfixed their enemies with wonder. The performance culminated by one of the twins cutting the other into pieces and then bringing him back to life. This was too much for the incredulous lords of death. Their supreme leaders asked for the same trick to be performed on themselves. It was, and they both died forever. The twins then rose from the underworld to the sky, where they either became the sun and moon, or the Morning and Evening Stars.

The Hero Twin legend surely was the model of the death journey of the Maya elite to the underworld and beyond. The glyphic texts on funerary vases seem to deal with death and the road of the dead to the layered underworlds, with gods mentioned who played prominent roles in the *Popol Vuh*. There must have been one stock formula on these vessels, with minor variations. The Hero Twins themselves are among the most frequent depictions on this pottery, attired as young lords, the conquerors of death. The old snail god must be the principal lord of hell. In an extraordinary vase owned by Gillett Griffin, he is being drawn from his shell by a young man, surely one of the Hero Twins, who is about to slay him. The Bat Gods who achieve a Pyrrhic victory over the twins are often shown in all their sinister raiment.

In other words, these glorious creations of the great Maya artists and calligraphers are not celebrating life, but death itself. In this, the Maya are less strange than they might seem to western eyes, for many Asian and New World peoples have viewed death not as the termination of life but as rebirth and even ultimate release. This theme recalls the Tibetan Book of the Dead, recited over the dying and dead man to tell him of the journey which he is to take and the adventures which will befall him, with the intention that he may so concentrate his

immortal mind that Nirvana may be attained. Between what we call death and the end of the long road, much time may elapse, fraught with dangers for the soul.

The end of the road for the Maya rulers was to be reborn as the celestial gods from whom they claimed descent, worshipped by the Maya people before the temple-pyramids which housed their mortal remains. The Maya, like the Hindu and Buddhist philosophers of the Orient, had perceived the fundamental identity of life and death, and that on the great journey on which all must go, even the most powerful kings, the starting point was the same as the destination.

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