

Maya Calendars and Writing: 2

The writing system

Graham Atkinson

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Overview

- History of the decipherment:
 - 1800s, 1900 - 1950s, 1950s – present
- Language structure
 - Reading order
 - Sentence structure
 - Structure of idealized inscription
 - Glyph block structure
- Key glyphs to use as landmarks
- Structural analysis of inscriptions

History of decipherment: 1800s

- 1800s:
 - Exploration of the Maya region by Westerners
 - Stephens and Catherwood (1840s)
 - Colorful and exciting narrative descriptions
 - Beautiful and remarkably accurate drawings
 - Maudslay (1880s)
 - Glass plate photographs
 - Papier mache molds
 - Numbers and calendars worked out

History of decipherment: 1900-1950

- Decipherment held back by mistaken beliefs
 - No history in the inscriptions - WRONG
 - Nothing but calendrical and astronomical information - WRONG
 - No phonetic component to the glyphs – WRONG
 - The Maya were peaceful astronomer priests – WRONG
- Tatiana Proskuriakov saw history and biography in inscriptions
 - Architect who went as an artist to document excavations at Piedras Negras
 - Noticed the time period covered in many stelae was about a human lifetime
 - Identified the meaning of key glyphs
 - Birth, coronation, death

History of decipherment: 1950+

- Knorosov - Dresden Codex
- Diego de Landa's "alphabet"
 - See Figure 2 in Kettunen
- Phonetic component, but also logographic
- Difficulties:
 - Lack of uniformity of writing and glyph composition
 - Different ways of writing the same sound/word
 - Recent decades: Explosion in understanding

Reading order

- See figure on Calvin page 5
- Pairs of columns
 - A1 B1 A2 B2 A3 B3...
 - At bottom of column pair move to next pair of columns to the right
- If a single row, then read left to right
- If a single column, then read down

Sentence structure

- Date, verb, (object,) subject
- Transitive versus intransitive verbs:
 - Treated differently, with different sets of pronouns
- Pronouns often implicit, i.e., not written if 3rd person
- No gender differences in words (except for female indicator IX)

Glyph Block Structure

- See Calvin page 5
- Reading order varies, but generally top to bottom, left to right
- Components are syllables and logograms
- Prefix or superfix could be a pronoun or a phonetic component or a phonetic complement to a logogram
- Postfix or subfix could be a tense or mood indicator, or a phonetic component of the word, or a phonetic complement to a logogram

Structure of an idealized inscription

- Initial series introductory glyph
- Long count
- Tzolk'in date
- Lunar series
- Haab date
- Verb, (object,) subject
- Distance number
- Tzolk'in and Haab dates
- Verb, (object,) subject ...
- Not all of these components will necessarily be present, but if they are they will almost always be in this order

Key glyphs as landmarks

- Parse the inscription using dates and other landmarks
- ISIG and dates
- Distance number introductory glyph (before a distance number)
- Anterior and posterior date indicators (after a distance number)
- Calendar round dates

Other important glyphs

- Emblem glyphs – dynasties?
- Toponym glyphs – places
- Names of kings and queens

Resources

- www.wayeb.com
- www.famsi.org
- www.mesoweb.com
- Michael D. Coe, Breaking the Maya Code
- Michael Coe and Mark Van Stone, “Reading the Maya Glyphs”
- John Montgomery, “Dictionary of Maya Hieroglyphs”
- Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, “Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens”
- Kettunen and Helmke, Introduction to Maya Hieroglyphs, downloadable from www.wayeb.com
- Inga Calvin, Maya Hieroglyphics Study Guide, downloadable from www.famsi.org

Next session

- Maya ceramics
- The different types of ceramic vessels
- Surface treatment
- What is written on them
- What is painted on them
- Justin Kerr Maya vase data base
- Local places to see them

Additional resources

- Look at the table of phonetic syllables in Calvin or Kettunen
- Look at some of the tables of glyphs in Calvin to see the way they are constructed from syllables
- Look at the Stanley Guenter mesoweb article of the Tomb of Janaab Pakal to see the thought process of an epigrapher