Maya Calendars and Writing: 2
The writing system

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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 Proskuriakoff 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.wayeb.com)
- [www.famsi.org](www.famsi.org)
- [www.mesoweb.com](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](www.wayeb.com)
- Inga Calvin, *Maya Hieroglyphics Study Guide*, downloadable from [www.famsi.org](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