Archaeology and Epigraphy Revisited

An Archaeological Enigma and the Origins of Maya Writing

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I
n a previous paper (Sharer, in press), I discussed the question raised by the recently discovered Enigma and its principal hallmark, Maya writing, as viewed from the perspective of current archaeological evidence. One of the themes touched on involved the fundamental changes occurring within the Maya polity (Sharer 1977), as it is being transformed from a prehis- toric to a historic discipline, due to the development and application of new evidence from the investigations of Maya hieroglyphs. For the breakthroughs of the past 25 years in Maya epigraphy (see Jones, in this issue) have expanded our knowledge of Maya writing from the use of ideographic and syllabic scripts to the use of scripts with signs or characters used in the context of accounting, a development that is in part the result of the efforts of Maya scholars in the Americas. Today, we have more than a century of research on the subject of Maya writing, and we now have a broader understanding of the complexity and diversity of the writing systems used by the Maya. This has led to a reevaluation of the role of writing in the development and growth of the Maya civilization.

The Maya civilization is known for its impressive achievements in art, architecture, and science, including the development of a complex writing system. This system, known as Maya writing, was used for a variety of purposes, including record-keeping, divination, and communication. In the past, scholars have focused on the decipherment of the Maya writing system, which has led to a better understanding of the history and culture of the Maya. However, recent research has also highlighted the importance of the role of writing in the development and growth of the Maya civilization.

In this paper, I will discuss the role of writing in the Maya civilization, focusing on the development of the Maya writing system and its relationship to the history and culture of the Maya. I will also discuss the importance of the role of writing in the development and growth of the Maya civilization, and how it has contributed to our understanding of the past.

An archaeological enigma: Feature 15, EL Tropecho, Chalcatzingo, El Salvador, a series of Preclassic clay-lined troughs within a substructure platform that remains unexplained, their function unknown.

Prehistoric Versus Historic Perspectives

All but the most recent few thousand years of the human past, less than 1% of the span of human occupation on this planet, precedes the invention of writing as we know it. Excluding any kind of historical perspective, we cannot even establish the basic historical context of the Maya civilization. For example, the Classic Maya script can be traced directly back to Late and Terminal Preclassic Maya writing. However, the earliest inscriptions on the eastern Maya area are written in the Postclassic period, and there are indications that these inscriptions are related to the Classic Maya script.

A critical factor in understanding the role of writing in the Maya civilization is the development of the Maya writing system. The Maya writing system is a complex system of signs and symbols that was used for a variety of purposes, including record-keeping, divination, and communication. The development of the Maya writing system was a significant achievement, and it allowed the Maya to keep track of important events, record histories, and communicate with one another.

One of the most significant achievements of the Maya writing system was its ability to record important events and to keep track of important dates. This allowed the Maya to keep track of important events and to record the dates of important events. For example, the Maya were able to record the dates of important events such as the construction of important buildings or the planting of crops. The development of the Maya writing system also allowed the Maya to record the dates of important events in their history, such as the establishment of important cities or the beginning of important wars.

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The Origins of Maya History

The roots of the world's earliest writing systems, cuneiform, Egyptians hieroglyphs, the Indus script, painted pottery, and here, the maps and symbols used in the Chalcolithic period, are embedded in the dim recesses of prehistory. There are, of course, no historical accounts describing the origins of the first writing systems. Only archaeology, somewhat irrevocably unable to provide the evidence to assist the quest for understanding the genesis of history. The origin of writing is no exception. The Classic Maya script can be traced directly back to Late and Terminal Preclassic Maya writing. However, the earliest inscriptions on the eastern Maya area are written in the Postclassic period, and there are indications that these inscriptions are related to the Classic Maya script.

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same reason, and because they present few close historical or ethno-

graphic analogies, their function and meaning are difficult to ac-

terd.

Several clues to the age of such notations are furnished by the exca-

vations in the Salama Valley, Guat-

canas. The first of these is a carved stone excavated under con-

trolled conditions from the mort-

dars site of Los Mangales, in the northern portion of the Salama Valley. Known as Monument 13 (Fig. 2), it is apparently thus far

unique in the annals of Maya ar-

chaology—a small stel" with a

composition motif carved on one face, including two columns of dots rendered as small depres-

sions or "cupules," It, along with a companion with an even simpler notation (a "bar" surmounted by two dots), is part of a line as a lintel spanning an elite burial crypt ceramically dated to ca.

500-200 B.C.

The second clue is provided by Monument 21 (Fig. 3), a boulder engraved with a complex series of notations located in the Sibahai drainage along the south side of the Salama Valley. Monument 21 is not entirely devoid of cultural context, however, since excavations at its base recovered a few eroded pot-

ershards, the sole evidence for its date. The only two identifiable examples date to the span of ca.

500-200 B.C., which could indi-
cate that this monument is an ap-

proximate contemporary of the Los Mangales stones. Monument 21 is engraved on one face (subdivided into three panels) with a series of small cupules or dots, several much larger cupules, and grooved markings. Many of the dots are cupped, and the most common of these clusters is triangular (nine ex-

amples), usually oriented with the apex downward. Less common are four-dot and five-dot clusters. Paired dots (including larger cu-

pules), connected by a bar-like

groove, also occur. And a unique symbol composed of a grooved cross with a dot at the apex, plus dots in each quarter, is carved in the lower right portion of the mon-

ument.

The meaning of such motifs re-

mains a matter of speculation. An

obvious interpretation is of the dots as counts of some sort. Alterna-
tively, the prevalent triadic clusters among Monument 21 could be cupule representations of the human face, except that not all examples possess the proper orientation (eyes "up-

permost). In fact, a more elaborate motif near the base of the lower-

most panel clearly represents a human face, completely one ear-

nament. It is rendered on a more recently exposed rock surface cre-

ated by an eroded area, however, and hence seemingly postdates the remainder of the engravings.

4 Monument 10, Chalcatzingo, El Salvador, fragment of a cupulate monument dating to ca. 200 B.C. A.D. 200 (After Anderson 1975.)

The triadic clusters also recall simi-
lar motifs in Olmec art (Moff 133, cf. Joralemon 1971:10) and later Maya iconography (cf. Thompson 1962; the glyphs for Ix (TJ52), the Ahau (TJ53), and the "fire flat" (TJ67). The cross motif appears compa-
rable to the peaked cross sign, usually seen as representing calendr-
ical calculations, with a wide dis-

tribution in Mesoamerica (Aveni, Hartung, and Buckingham 1978). Three of these signs are reported at Tlahuacela, near Texcocoacan, with a proposed dating of ca. 500-100 B.C. (ibid: 273). But the most obvious association for the Monument 21 cross motif would be the later Maya Lamat glyph (T510). The deeper cup-like pits on Monu-

ment 21 recall the "defacement" markings on several Olmec mon-

uments (Clewlow et al. 1967:70-75). Similar pits occur on stones without indications of defacement, as on Monument 10 (Chalcatzingo (Fig. 4), dating from the Late or Terminal Preclassic (ca. 200 B.C.-A.D. 200). Anderson 1978:137) and the un-

dated (Middle Preclassic?) altar I at Chalcatzingo (Fig. 5), the latter including the same kind of con-

necting grooves as on Monument 21 (see Gay 1971:75).

Further comparisons could cer-

tainly be made between the nota-

tions on Monuments 13 and 21 from the Salama Valley and various

5 Altar 1, Chalcatzingo, Morelos, Mexico; an undated rock carving signifying the Sixth Sun of Venus Monument 21. (After Gay 1971.)
similar rock art motifs throughout Mesoamerica. The importance of the Salama Valley monuments is that they offer rare archaeological evidence as to the antiquity of such notations—dating to an era (ca. 500-200 B.C.) that almost surely saw the emergence of the earliest Mesoamerican writing systems. Thus they offer a clue and suggest that Maya and related scripts may have originated at least in part from such notational traditions. But beyond this the available ar-

chaological evidence is so spotty that little else can be offered in the way of explanation at the present time. Possible interpretations of the meaning of these notations could be generated, of course, but given the present state of knowledge they would likely be largely speculative. The fact remains that the full signifi-
cance of this widespread tradition of notational engraving, quite pos-
sibly a crucial clue to the origins of Mesoamerican writing systems, remains an enigma—mute testimony to the difficulty of archaeological interpret-

ation in the absence of history. As such, this example should only re-
inforce the true importance of the progress being made in deci-

phering Maya writing, as it con-

tinues to provide an invaluable his-
torical perspective for archaeolo-
gists investigating the ancient civilization of the Maya.