Maya Glyphs

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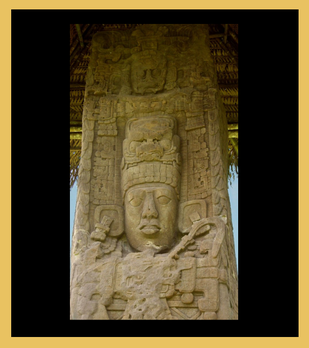
Maya History

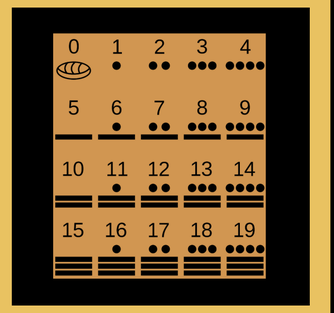
Proto-Maya Glyphic writing emerged during the Olmec civilization, the predecessors to the Maya, around 650 BCE, however Maya Glyphs thrived during the Classical Period (200-900 CE) of Maya civilization. While Maya civilization fell at the end of its Classical Period, Maya descendants continued to occupy the Yucatán Peninsula throughout the Spanish Conquest, but were actively repressed. Christian clergymen would train elite, male Maya scribes how to read and write using the Latin script. Some Europeans wanted to learn about the Maya writing system in order to destroy it. A certain Friar Diego de Landa, for example, tried to equate the Maya glyphs to the Spanish alphabet in Latin script. He also lead the infamous Book Burning of 1562 where thousands of Maya texts were destroyed. Four major codices of Maya text survived, including the Dresden Codex shown above.



When the first form of the Maya script began to arise in 650 BCE, it was a wholly independent invention. It was mainly used for historical documentation. This is unlike many other scripts that arose out of a need for administration and trade records, like Sumerian Cuneiform.
To the left is an example of a Maya stelae which recorded the birth, accomplishments, reign, and death of a king. Maya history was recorded on stelae, pyramids and temples, tombs, monuments, shell, jade, bark paper, and other materials, both perishable and nonperishable.

Maya Number System

The Maya number system functioned using powers of twenty, otherwise known as vigesimal. By not using a decimal (powers of ten) system, they could compute large numbers and accurately predict celestial events hundreds of years in the future.
The Maya invented the concept of zero independently, just like the rest of their writing system. Zero was represented by a horizontal oval with an almost empty woven basket-like appearance.
The Maya number system can be compared to how Roman numerals operate. One dot represented one unit, while a line represented 5 units. Lines were stacked vertically with one to four dots, or units, were placed on top.



Orientation of Maya Glyphs

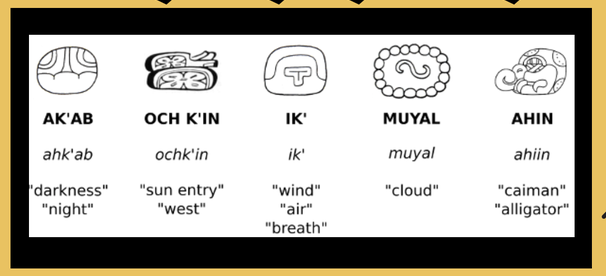
The Maya writing system was very complex, but for English speakers, for example, the direction of reading is easy to grasp. Imagine reading a newspaper in English. It would be read right to left, top to bottom. As shown in the image above, two "boxes" would be read before continuing to the next two below, then it would reset to the top of the next column to the right, if applicable. However, the Maya script was also written in single lines, columns, and grids.

Maya Long Count Calendar

The Maya Long Count Calendar worked as 3 cycles together. No day would repeat for 52 years, unlike the yearly reoccurrence of the modern calendar.

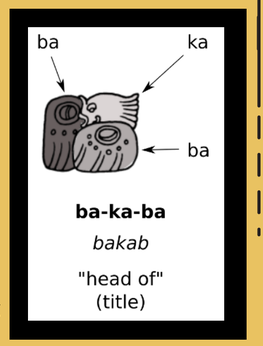
The first and most important day of the Long Count Calendar was named "4 Ahau, 8 Cumkh." This was the day of creation for the Maya, and according to our modern system it would have fallen on 13 August 3114 BCE.

Maya Logosyllabary



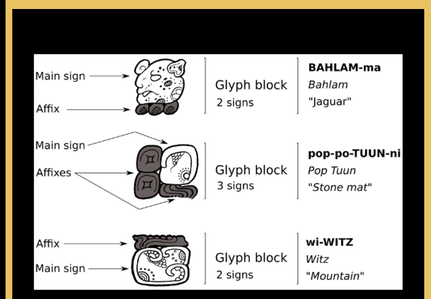
Examples of Maya logograms

The Maya glyph system is considered to be a logosyllabary with phonetic components. This means that each sign either represents a complete morpheme, or word, as a logogram or individual syllables as a syllabogram. Furthermore, affixes indicating numbers, pronouns, or phonetic complements were common and could be attached in any way to the main glyph sign. Phonetic complements were signs that indicated certain context due to a high level of polyvalence, where signs could be written and read in multiple ways, within the script.
There were around 700 signs in the Maya writing system at its height during the Classical Period (200-900 CE).
The vast majority of Maya writing used the 3rd person, singular grammatical form, especially in their historical records on stelae, for example.



Example of
Maya syllablogram

Complex Signs within Glyph Cells



Maya glyphs were written in square boxes with rounded edges. One cell could contain multiple signs. Syllables, logograms, numbers, and phonetic components could be combined to create complex morphemes. Complex signs can also be seen in the Chinese script, for example.
Some signs could be doubly represented by "head variants" or "full figure variants." As seen in the first image for "Bahlam," or jaguar, the scribe used a jaguar's head as part of the sign. While not shown, there are instances where full figures of gods could represent everyday items. For example, the Maya dog god could be used to represent a normal dog, thus readers relied on context at times (see: phonetic components).
Furthermore, more frequently used syllables and logograms had various possible representations. Being a highly artistic society, it is thought that scribes had a certain amount of creative license while still maintaining the high level of standardization typical of a fully developed civilization.

The Maya People Today

There are roughly 5-6 million Maya speakers today. The use of the Latin script to write the Maya language is still common practice, but there has been a revival in Maya Glyphic writing among indigenous Maya speakers, which they have helped scholars decipher, to reclaim their history and culture.

Breaking the Maya Code. Directed by David Lebrun, 2008.
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Gnanadesikan, Amalia E. “Maya Glyphs: Calendars of Kings.” *The Writing Revolution: Cuneiform to the Internet*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009. Pp. 79-94.
Urton, Gary. *Signs of the Inka Khipu: Binary Coding in the Andean Knotted-String Records*, University of Texas Press, 2003.