

MESOAMERICAN
WRITING
SYSTEMS

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Elizabeth P. Benson, *Editor*

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Preface

THE Indians of Mesoamerica were the only pre-Spanish peoples of the New World to have writing systems. These systems ranged from rudimentary to highly complex, and thus exhibit most of the stages in the evolution of literacy. The most advanced was that of the ancient Maya, and it is their script which has claimed most attention in this field over the past century.

Epigraphic research on Mesoamerican writing systems has been exceptionally productive in the last twenty-five years. Major landmarks are Thompson's 1950 study of Maya hieroglyphic writing, the discovery by Caso of the historical content of Mixtec pictorial manuscripts, and the publications by Berlin in 1958 and by Proskouriakoff in 1960 of evidence for dynastic history in Classic Maya inscriptions. At the same time, a host of still-unanswered problems was raised by this research. Perhaps the most controversial and stimulating study in recent years has been the re-examination by Knorosov of evidence for extensive phoneticism in the Maya codices.

It was our feeling that the time was right for a conference on the subject of Mesoamerican writing systems, not just to summarize what is now known but to raise and examine some of the outstanding problems, as well as to present, even though in preliminary form, some of the most recent research not yet in print elsewhere.

As has been our custom in past Dumbarton Oaks conferences, a small number of speakers was invited to present papers on Saturday morning and afternoon. On Sunday morning, several volunteered papers were given, one of which is included here. The audience was limited to specialists in, and students of, Mesoamerican writing systems.

We are grateful to Floyd G. Lounsbury for helping us to organize the conference, and for so ably chairing the sessions. We are appreciative of the interest and cooperation of William R. Tyler, Director of Dumbarton Oaks, and of the efforts of all those on the Dumbarton Oaks staff who worked toward the success of this conference, particularly Anne-Louise Schaffer, the Assistant for the Collection, who was also helpful in the editing of this publication.

In this volume, there are certain inconsistencies, from one paper to another, in the use of linguistic terminology and punctuation, for the editor felt that individual authors' designations should be retained.

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Phoneticism in the Late Pre-Hispanic Central Mexican Writing System

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EVER since serious scholarly research aimed at the fullest possible decipherment of Lowland Maya writing was initiated during the past century in the wake of the discovery and publication (1864) by Brasseur de Bourbourg of the Landa manuscript containing the famous "alphabet," scholars have sharply disagreed concerning the extent, if any, of genuine phoneticism in this system. Today the dispute seems as keen as ever. Although obviously the question must be solved essentially utilizing archaeological and ethnohistorical data from the Maya region itself, the structural principles of other Mesoamerican writing systems might provide information of some relevance to this long-standing argument. Primarily this is because it appears to be generally accepted that all Mesoamerican writing systems were probably genetically related and consequently would be expected to share various basic patterns (cf. Nowotny 1959; Prem n.d.).

The Mesoamerican (partial) writing system which is best known and understood is that which was functioning in Central Mexico at the time of the Conquest. Usually called "Aztec," it most properly should be viewed as a particular regional variant of a widespread general system which has been labeled (Nicholson 1962: 202; n.d.c) "Mixteca-Puebla" from the basic stylistic-iconographic tradition which normally served as the medium of its graphic expression.¹ It is the best understood system principally because, not only was it flourishing at Contact, but it also continued in active use until long after; consequently, a rich corpus of surviving examples is extant,

1. Following the presentation of my paper (Nicholson n.d.c) at the New World Writing Systems Conference, American Museum of Natural History, New York, July 22-24, 1970, some strong objections were raised against my employment of this term. While I personally hold no great brief for it, until I am convinced that a clearly more satisfactory label has become established usage, I will continue to use it in a rather tentative, rough-and-ready fashion.

many of which are glossed in Spanish and/or indigenous languages (almost exclusively Nahuatl) written in Roman script.²

With this wealth of data at its disposal, modern scholarship has more or less satisfactorily determined the basic structural principles of the late pre-Hispanic Central Mexican writing system.³ Interestingly, however, a certain amount of disagreement—although somewhat less so than in the case of Lowland Maya writing—has prevailed concerning the extent of genuine phoneticism in the pre-Hispanic system. All agree, while employing a rather confusingly diverse terminology (“pictographic,” “figurative,” “descriptive-representational,” “ikological,” “symbolic,” “elliptical,” “ideographic,” etc.), that the system was based primarily on the effective use of graphic images consisting of recognizable pictorial depictions—plus a fairly extensive set of conventionalized symbols denoting both concrete objects and abstract concepts. In short, the overall system appears to have been basically an unusually complex and sophisticated “picture writing”—or, if a more modern technical term is preferred, the system was essentially semiasographic (Gelb 1963: 252). In addition, however, primarily to convey proper names (places, persons, titles, etc.) a much more structured subsystem had been developed utilizing an extensive repertoire of more or less standardized graphemes,⁴ often in combinations up to five or even more.⁵ It is here and

2. The fullest “master lists” of Mesoamerican pictorials are Glass n.d. and Nicholson n.d.a. Since the former contains full bibliographic apparatus for all pictorials mentioned in this paper, to avoid tedious over-citation no specific references will be included, with the understanding that all publications of and studies concerning these sources can be ascertained by consulting this comprehensive survey.

3. Apart from a host of interpretations and discussions of specific pictorials, the most enlightening general descriptions and analyses of the late pre-Hispanic Central Mexican writing system are: Aubin 1849 (1885); Tylor 1865 (1878: 90–8); Orozco y Berra 1877–81, 1880 (1960): Libro III, Caps. 1–7; Siméon 1885 (1963): i–xiv; Seler 1888 (1902–23, I: 407–16); Brinton 1886a, 1886b; Tozzer 1912; Dibble 1940, 1955 (1966); Nowotny 1959, 1967; and Prem 1967: 70–9, 1970, n.d. Also of great utility are Peñafiel 1885, a catalog of Codex Mendoza place signs, Peñafiel 1897, a much more comprehensive catalog of place signs from various sources, and Barlow and MacAfee 1949, a catalog of Codex Mendoza graphemes.

4. Proskouriakoff (1968) has recently suggested, prompted by usages followed by Knorozov (1963, 1967), that in the analysis of Lowland Maya writing the “grapheme,” a unit of form of unknown meaning, be systematically distinguished from “sign,” a grapheme of ascertained meaning. I agree that this would be a useful distinction for Mayanists to try to follow consistently. In the case of the subsystem employed in late pre-Hispanic Central Mexican writing for proper names, however, although the significance of most elements is known and therefore might nearly all be termed “signs,” I would prefer the more generic label, “grapheme”, for them across the board and will so employ it in this paper (cf. Whorf 1932: 297 and Barthel 1968: 288). “Sign” will be used for what are usually referred to as name and place “glyphs.”

5. In his recent papers Prem (1967, 1970, n.d.) uses “narrative pictography” (“Narrative Bilder-schriften”) for the former and “hieroglyphic writing” (“Hieroglyphenschriften”) for the latter.

here alone, it is agreed, that genuine phoneticism was a feature of the pre-Hispanic system.

The controversy revolves around the *extent* of this phonetic usage. Aubin (1849 [1885]), who was the first⁶ to describe clearly the actual phonetic methods employed and to illustrate them with various concrete examples, affirmed its extensive pre-Hispanic use—so much so that he labeled it an “écriture syllabique.”⁷ Other leading students, however, such as Selser (1902–23, 1: 269, 559; 1904: 209 [defective English translation of this passage]), felt that Aubin had relied too much on colonial documents reflecting Hispanic influence and, while agreeing that phoneticism was commonly employed particularly in certain mid-sixteenth century Acolhuaque pictorials such as Vergara and Kingsborough (Tepetlaoztoc), were of the opinion that its pre-Hispanic usage had been much more restricted. More recently, similar differences of opinion have not been uncommon—e.g., Long 1935, 1936 (cf. Dibble 1960, Thompson 1959) vs. Whorf 1935.

A truly comprehensive description and analysis of the late pre-Hispanic Central Mexican writing system, utilizing all available data, has yet to be published. In this brief paper no attempt will be made to deal with the general system even in summary fashion. The discussion will be entirely focused on the single issue of the extent of phoneticism in the indigenous system. By “phoneticism” is meant the employment of some of the graphemes to convey—entirely independent of their semantic connotations—all or part of the sound values of the Nahuatl names of what they represent to form all or part of words containing similar sounds.⁸ This technique of non-semantic, purely phonic message conveyance by pictorial representations constitutes the basic principle of what is today commonly denominated “rebus writing.” Nowotny (1959: 97) and Prem (1970: 159; n.d.: 8) have recently strongly objected to this term, but if reference is being made to its fundamental technique of word formation—entirely

6. None of the primary chroniclers of Central Mexican native culture presents anything approaching an adequate description of the writing system. Las Casas and Mendieta (followed by Torquemada), however, describing the phonetic utilization of some graphemes by the missionaries in attempting to convey Christian doctrines (see below), certainly implied strongly that this was a basic feature of the pre-Hispanic system. Aubin was strongly influenced by those passages, calling the statement of Mendieta (he quoted it as borrowed by Torquemada), “la véritable clef de l’écriture mexicaine” (Aubin 1849 [1885: 25]).

7. He tried to distinguish between a much more “ideographic-symbolic” type of writing, “Dans les compositions grossières,” and an essentially phonetic “écriture syllabique,” (“n’est plus idéographique que par abréviation ou par impuissance”), arguing that the latter was particularly employed in censuses, tribute lists, and cadasters, such as Codex Vergara, on which he based so much of his whole approach to the analysis of the basic nature of the system.

8. This usage essentially agrees with that of the author of the most influential recent general study of writing systems in English (Gelb 1963: e.g., 193–4).