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Theories of Writing

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Geographic and Social Conditions of Mesoamerican Writing Origins

Writing is suggested to have three main locations of origination: Mesopotamia, China and Mesoamerica in 3200 BCE, 1250 BCE and 650 BCE respectively (Schmandt-Besserat and Erard 8). It is broadly suggested that despite these three locations being separated by space and time, that writing evolved in similar manners and due to similar geographic and social conditions. Mesoamerica is dated to have the oldest traces of writing and to be the most geographically separated of these locations. Understanding the geographic and social atmosphere of early Mesoamerican writing can give proposed insight into the processes and conditions that occurred prior to and during the origination of writing elsewhere, and how writing became an important element of societies.

A crucial feature in the success of Mesoamerican societies and one known for giving the ability for writing to be formed is the geographic location of Mesoamerican societies. The Valley of Mexico through the east extending into the Yucatan peninsula contained the spread of Mesoamerican cities (Justeson 438; Knox and McCarthy 37). This is a location credited for its tropical climate, with consistent year-round precipitation, fertile soils and relatively gentle topography (Knox and McCarthy 26-28). These conditions facilitated high and dependable agricultural potential for societies if they settled there (Knox and McCarthy 26-28, 30). The creation of early Mesoamerican cities came when groups of people began seeking alternative lifestyles from the nomadic, foraging dependence they had been pursuing, and Mesoamerica provided conditions that would support sedentary subsistence living (Knox and McCarthy

26-28). People began settling down in these areas, and slowly small-scale social organization began occurring in the form of agricultural villages; however, this did not immediately lead to larger social organization or an immediate development of writing (Knox and McCarthy 37). Yet, the establishment of sedentary lifestyles was a first step in social evolution which produced writing. Prior to social settlement and the beginnings of social organization, there was no need for writing, as there were stronger priorities of basic survival. However, as agricultural lifestyles became established and the demand for food was met, a space for additional life priorities and social construction opened and city and social organization began developing. Additionally, with the settling of cities, people were able to slowly shift their time into secondary activities such as the creation of artisan goods, creating tablets, ceramics and fabrics (Marcus 17; Knox and McCarthy 40-42). These artisan goods would eventually become a place for writing in the forms of symbol pictures and gradually words as writing advanced (Marcus 17).

Mesoamerican writing formed in stages. There are four main categories of writing development: pictography, idiographic, phonetic and alphabetic with the addition of logographic and logosyllabic stretching between idiographic and phonetic distinctions but not always being explicitly different (Marcus 38; Bolter 46). Mesoamerican writing focused largely on the first three stages with logographic and logosyllabic elements, in four time periods of writing and social development (Marcus 38). Pictography writing was exhibited as hieroglyphic writing originating in “a pre-State evolutionary context, among societies with intensive agriculture and hereditary social ranking, but prior to true social stratification or political centralization” (Marcus 37). As was done with all variances of early writing, hieroglyphic writing was a “precursor of phonetic writing” and writing advancements grew alongside social developments (Bolter 47). The gradually expansive social exchange of trade, goods, and people internally and externally

helped spur a need for evolving forms of record keeping, naming and organization that was more permanent than prior speaking exchanges (Knox and McCarthy 30).

The early formative period of Mesoamerican writing from 1500-900 BCE predates the writing origins date Schmandt-Besserat and Erard quote, likely due to discrepancies in the distinction of early writing definitions (Marcus 42). In the early formative period writing was dominated by pictographic displays and with early ideographic meanings and representations (Marcus 42-43). These images conveyed ideas, meanings, and representations, but not strictly direct words, sounds or universally recognized definitions (Marcus 42-43). These were often in the form of simple line symbols, sometimes in a series or pattern and most easily found on movable objects or stone (Marcus 42-43). This stage of pictography was most often used by the small but growing elite on artifacts or sculptures, as social rankings gently developed but did not yet drastically stratify society (Marcus 42-43).

The middle formative period that followed lasted until 400 BCE and was characterized by more structured writing and social consolidation in the form of ideographic writing (Marcus 43-48). Writing, especially more complex writing, became a tool of the elite for control over others (Marcus 43-48). Pictograph writing transitioned into ideographic writing with higher degrees of meaning. Logographic elements in this ideographic writing gave more specific and repeatable meanings but did not reach verbal replication (Marcus 43-48). These symbols were then replicated over space and time to visually articulate their meaning and serve social purpose (Juteson 449-451). The usage of this writing helped form social patterns, helped organize cities and began to help document information with replicative meaning (Marcus 43-48; Juteson 449-451). Writing looked like figure 3 from Marcus 46, where more complex figures and depictions were shown, but with a distinct purpose as opposed to a more fluid meaning.

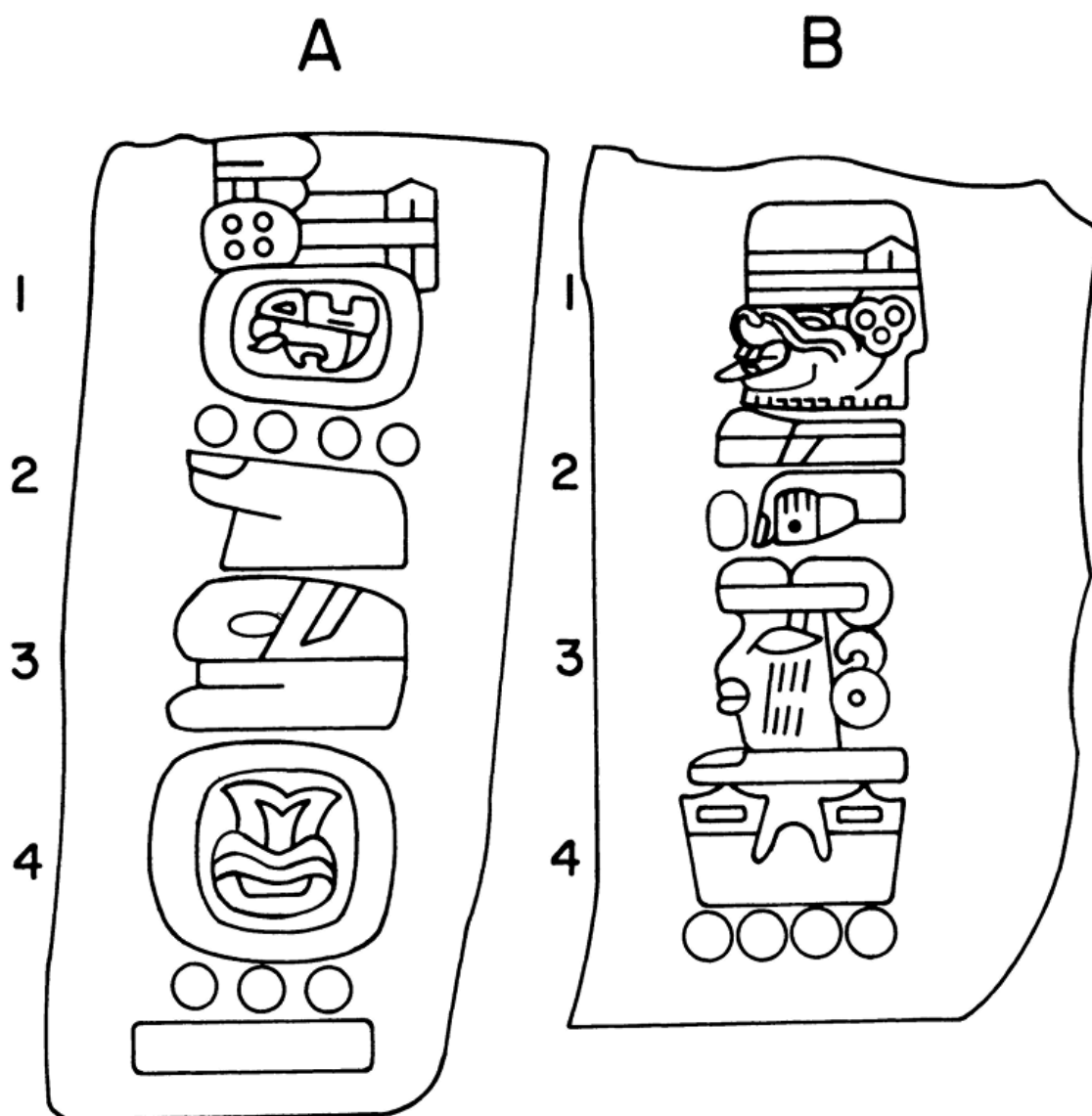


Figure 3 Stelae 12–13, Monte Albán, Valley of Oaxaca (redrawn from Caso 7, Figures 2, 3).

These symbols had a higher degree of complexity in the lines and image representations compared to the early formative period. As the logographic symbols and style for information recording became more widely spread a larger range of literacy occurred and the possibility of writing beyond the elite started to slowly shift. This is the period in Mesoamerican history

strongly regarded as writing's origins, due to the stronger social establishment and defined meaning of writing this period fostered.

The late formative period went until 50 BCE and was overall a transition from ideographic logographic writing to ideographic logosyllabic writing branching slightly into phonetic writing (Marcus 48-55). Symbols began to show repetitive meaning and branched away from being more picture representative to phonetic representations, allowing a shift towards some direct verbal translations (Marcus 48-55). Writing here was in many ways similar to the middle formative period, in vertical rows of meaningful symbols; however, these symbols reduced some visual complexity which was replaced for a repeatable and simpler meaning that also began having more direct phonetic translations (Marcus 48-55). This also expanded the uses of writing, as it began to be verbalized and its repetitive meaning was stronger. Writing allowed records of political ideology and events to be kept and the creation of monuments detailing them occurred (Marcus 54-55). Writing also helped strengthen and aid in trade and commerce occurring between and inside cities (Knox and McCarthy 26-28; Marcus 48-55). Traded goods could be recorded and power could be visualized based on written counts of wealth (Knox and McCarthy 26-28; Marcus 48-55). Writing also helped create control and organization in cities, as logosyllabic writings could help with navigation and visual organization (Knox and McCarthy 26-28). Lastly this type of writing was especially prevalent with the Mayans within the larger context of Mesoamerica and mostly specific to their society (Marcus 48-55).

The end of the late formative period and the shift into the proto-classic period, beyond and into the era of classic Mayan writing was more gradual than prior shifts (Marcus 55-56). The Mayans further developed sophisticated logosyllabic symbols into logosyllabic script (Marcus 56-64). While not all of this has direct phonetic verbal translations it was a conglomeration of

pictorial, ideographic and phonetic meanings when looking at it, typically monosyllabic (Marcus 56-64). This was the most advanced Mayan writing, and was mixed visual complexity, multimodal, and read vertically as shown in figure 12 from Marcus 62 (Marcus 56-64).

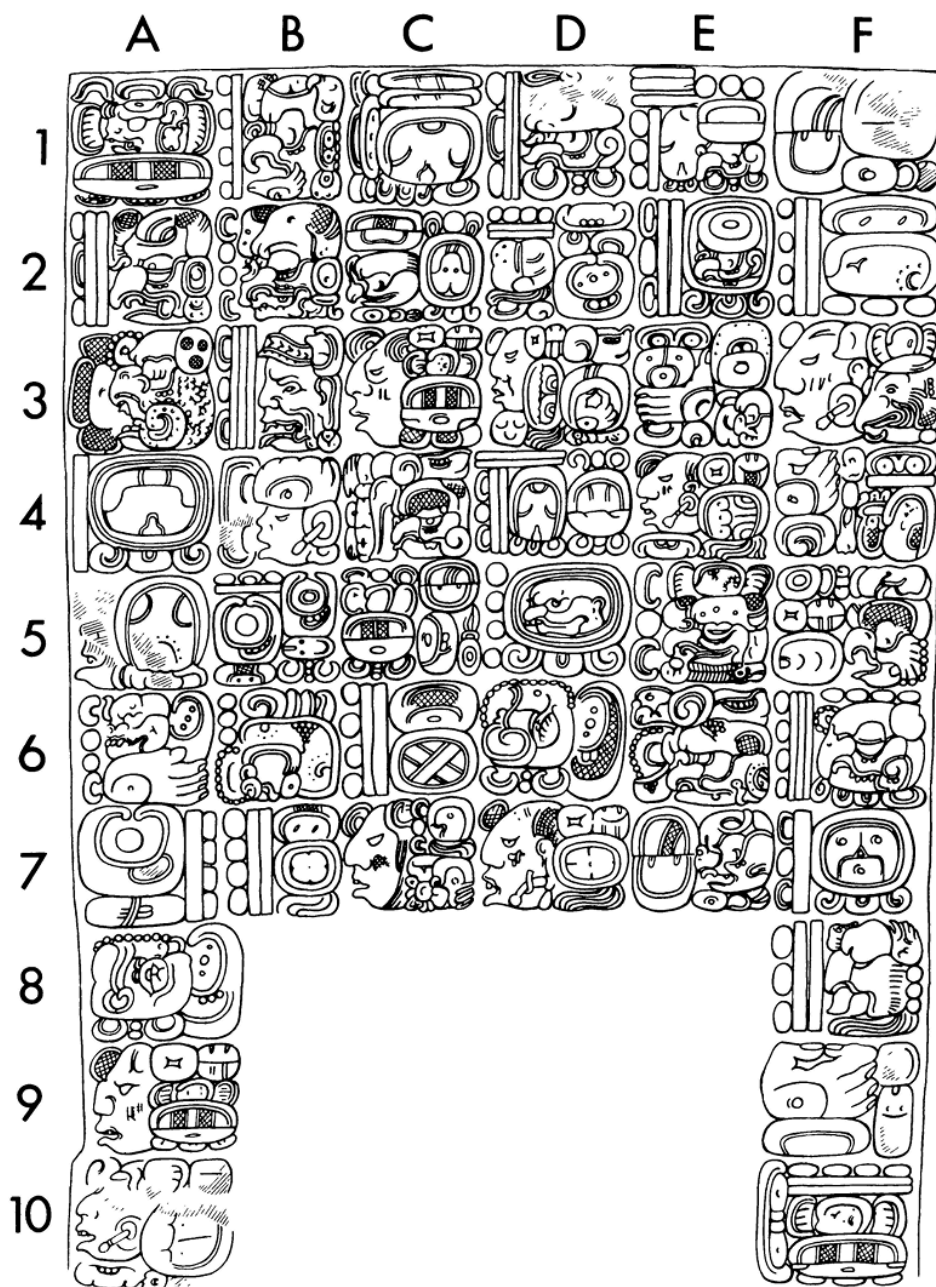


Figure 12 Back side of Stela 3, Piedras Negras, Guatemala (redrawn from Thompson 58, Figure 2).

Classic Mayan writing took mixed elements of all the former periods to complexly convey meaning from repeatable visual to meaning associations that also contained some direct phonetic speech (Marcus 56-64). This allowed for the more complex recording of history, religion, achievements and knowledge not able to be recorded before (Marcus 56-64). Meanwhile, by this point in social and city development, large social stratification had occurred, and the specialization of social services was occurring (Knox and McCarthy 40-42). Society was split up by profession and wealth, creating complex city dynamics which relied on and helped change writing on a social level. This helped create a highly controlled and organized society, which in turn helped foster further evolutions of logosyllabic script writing, and furthered the Mayans reputation of knowledge. Throughout the entire history of writing, both society and writing worked back and forth to influence the other, showing neither is fully responsible for the creation or evolution of the other, but instead reliant on the other for viability. This relationship is still true for modern writing and society.

The origin of writing in Mesoamerica is an evolution over time that shows stepped progression from basic pictures to logosyllabic script with meaning and verbalizations. As this evolution of writing occurred, so too did the social atmosphere that used and helped shape writing. Writing became necessary and highly beneficial for record keeping in society after the settlement and stratification of people into cities and the end of nomadic lifestyles. However, without the social settling and geographically ideal conditions to open up time and social space for secondary activities writing would not have originated in Mesoamerica when and where it did. These conditions and social evolution represented in Mesoamerica suggest an ideal geographic location and gradual social evolution are crucial for writing to have begun when and how it did, accounting for placement of writing origins worldwide.

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