

Book 1:

Writing in Maya Glyphs

Names, Places, & Simple Sentences

A Non-Technical Introduction to

MAYA GLYPHS



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The Aid and Education Project, Inc.

' El Proyecto de Ayuda y Educación '



This book is dedicated to the Maya people living today in Mesoamerica.

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Title Page Top: The Stingray Paddler (far left) and the Jaguar Paddler (far right) row the Maize God (center) and mythological beasts.

Title Page Bottom: The Canoe sinks, symbolizing the sinking of the Milky Way as the night progresses.





Chapter 3

Maya Titles, Professions, and Family Relationships



A Maya ballplayer

PERSONAL TITLES

Like us, the Maya used various titles for different people. We say Mister, Mrs., Ms., Sir, Reverend, Dr., Your Honor, etc. The Maya did much the same thing.

We are not going to try to cover all the Maya titles because there are just too many. But we do want to give a few titles that you may want to use for yourself or for someone in your family.

To do this, we use the logo prefixes *AJ* and *IX*. For a man, we always use *AJ*. For a woman we can either use *IX* or use the two prefixes together: *IX AJ*. (Normally, Maya words are the same whether we are talking about a man or a woman, but these prefixes are an exception to that rule.)

AJ is most commonly written with the logo  or .

IX is written as a female head logo like one of these  or



. You can often recognize the *IX* title by the 'IL' letters on the cheek, and the crosshatched or curved hair on the forehead.

You can think of *AJ* as meaning 'Sir' and *IX* as meaning 'Lady.' In most cases, this works well enough.

The prefixes *AJ* and *IX* are very convenient because they also mean 'the one who' or 'he/she of.' Thus, we can use them to describe people who do various jobs, or people from various

places, and use them as titles. For example, the Maya referred to ‘he/she of the sacred books,’ who was probably like a special librarian who kept the sacred books of the kingdom. The Maya also referred to ‘she/he the administrator,’ who could be someone who worked in a place like an office.

The prefixes *AJ* and *IX* are usually used for adults. If you are young or still a student, there is another Maya title that you can use. The title is *ch’ok*, and can be roughly translated as “young,” “apprentice,” or anyone not fully mature or trained in some activity. The glyph for this title is *ch’o-k(o)* , i.e. . (The *ko* syllable is over the ear.)

Since you are learning to write with Maya glyphs, you might want to use ‘scribe’ as your title. Throughout the Maya world, writing and painting were considered more or less the same thing, and the Maya did not distinguish between painters and scribes. Thus, the title for scribe and the title for artist were one and the same. In many cases the job of the scribe was a very high ranking position and the scribe was very learned. It is thus not surprising that there is a title ‘he/she the artist-sage.’

The Maya word for painting and writing is *tz’ib’* (where *tz’* is the glottal stop form of *tz*). This word can be written phonetically in Maya syllables as *tz’i-b’(i)* with the glyph . So, how do we write the title for a man who is a scribe or artist, or someone who likes to write stories? A scribe is just ‘one who writes.’ We now

know the glyph for ‘he who’ and the glyph for ‘to write.’ So, the glyph for scribe is just the combination of the two glyphs, i.e.



, or *AJ-tz'ib*, which means ‘he who writes.’ In another variation of the glyph for scribe, it is the picture that tells the whole

story  .

If we want the title for a woman who is a scribe, artist, or writer, we just use the symbol for *IX-* (instead of *AJ-*) in these

glyphs. Thus a lady scribe is given by the glyph  , which is *IX-tz'ib*'.

If you are still a student and still learning about reading and writing, you may not yet be ready to call yourself a scribe. In such a case, you can combine the glyph for young (i.e. *ch'ok*) with the glyph for scribe. In fact, one way to write the word for “student” in

Maya glyphs would be to write “young scribe:” i.e.  for a

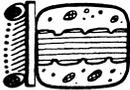
female student, and  for a male student.

We also know how to write the title of ‘artist-sage.’ In the Maya language an artist or sage is known as *itz'at* . In Maya

syllables this is *i-tz'a-t(a)*, and is written as  .

The glyph for book is  . This glyph is a pictogram of a Maya book called a “codex.” A codex was a book written on tree

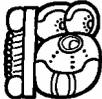
bark, folded up like an accordion, and bound with jaguar skin. So, we can write a title for She of/ He of the Books, in other words, for a librarian or someone who makes sure the books are kept in good order. This would also be a good title for anyone who likes to read or look at books. The title glyph for such a person could

be  for a man, or  for a woman.

A title and a profession of much interest to people today, as well as to the ancient Maya, was that of ballplayer. The Maya ball game was similar to current-day soccer. Often Maya kings were (or pretended to be) stars of the ball game.

If you play soccer, or any other ball game such as baseball, football, volleyball, or basketball, you can use the title of ballplayer. In the language of the ancient Maya, the word for the ball game was *pitz*, which we write in Maya syllables as *pi-tz(i)*.

Two glyphs for these syllables are  and . Thus a man who played ball would use the title *AJ-pitz*, and a woman who played ball would use the title *IX-pitz*. Combining the parts,

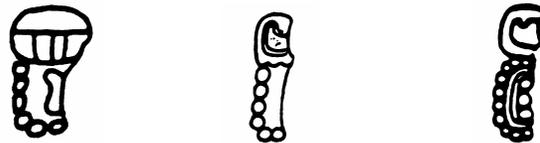
we have  for a male, and  for a female ball player.

Later on we are going to show you how to write whole sentences about yourself or someone in your family using Maya glyphs. You will want to keep the titles for people in mind so that you can use them then.

Perhaps you are wondering how the Maya wrote “ball field or ball court.” We know the glyph was  , but unfortunately we don’t know how the glyph was pronounced.

The Maya also had glyphs for titles like ‘Lord’ or ‘Divine One.’ These were used for the Maya gods, as well as Maya kings, who often posed as gods on earth.

Here then are some ways to write the title ‘Divine One’ in Maya glyphs.



TRADITIONAL AND MODERN MAYA PROFESSIONS

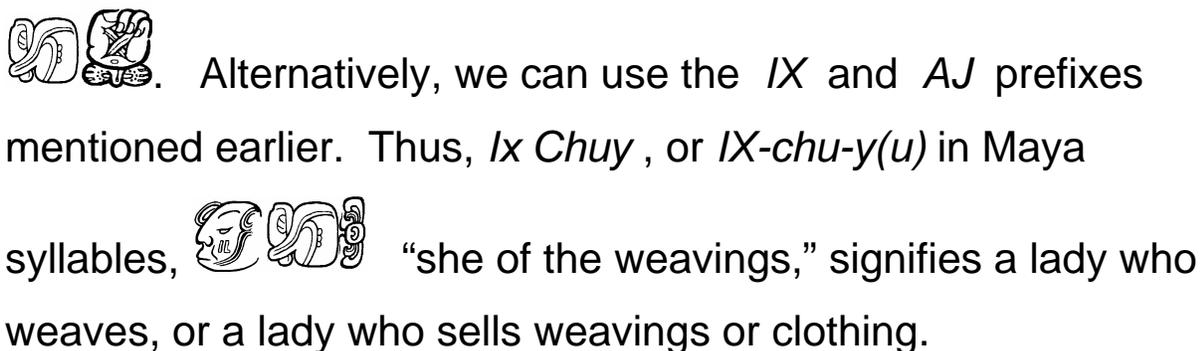
We can use Maya glyphs to indicate many traditional and modern Maya professions and activities. To do so, it is sometimes convenient to use the ending *-oom* , which means “someone who does,” or “someone who is going to do.” (The double *oo* simply indicates an unusually long *o* sound.) For example, the ancient Maya word for fish is *CHAY*, which is

depicted by the pictogram  . Thus the Maya word for fisherman is *CHAY-oom*, or *cha-yo-m(a)* in Maya syllables, because this means “he/she who fishes.” (Because we want an

unusually long *o* , we used disharmony and make the silent vowel different.) Thus, a glyph for a fisherman would be



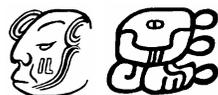
Similarly the word for sewing or weaving is *chuy*, so the word for a weaver is *chuy-oom*. We can write this word in Maya syllables as *chu-yo-m(a)*. In glyphs, the word for weaver is thus



What about someone who cooks or cleans? The Maya words for these activities are known as well. The word for washing or cleaning is *pok* , and the word for food (especially tortillas or tamales) is *waaj*. So, one way to refer to a man who cleans or takes care of a building is *AJ-pok-oom*. A woman who cooks, or works with food in any way, can be referred to as *IX-waaj*. One way to write these glyphs is as follows:



AJ po
ko
m(a)



IX wa j(i)
wa

Note the use of the ‘helper syllable’ in the spelling of *waaj*.

The Maya word for planting was *tz'ap*, which was written in

glyphs as . Can you see why this glyph block spells *tz'ap*? In fact, this glyph introduces another clever aspect of Maya writing called “infixing.” Infixing is when one glyph is placed inside another. In this case the syllable *pa* (or at least the tell-tale cross-hatching of the syllable *pa*) is placed totally within the syllable *tz'a*, thus giving the complete word *tz'ap*. This is usually written as *tz'a-[pa]*, where the square brackets indicate that the *pa* is infixed.

Thus, putting the pieces together, we get the word for farmer: *AJ tz'ap waaj* written in glyphs as  (literally, he who plants food) for a man, or  for a woman.

Finally, we should mention one very important job in the Maya world, that of ‘Day Keeper.’ A Day Keeper is a person who is very knowledgeable about the Maya calendar and the important days in the Maya year. (You will learn about the Maya calendar in the next booklet.) To write the title of Day Keeper, we can write

‘he/she of the days.’ The glyph for *day* is , and so the title

for a man who is a Day Keeper can be written as  , and  for a woman who is a Day Keeper.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Family relations were important in the Maya glyphs. Like us, the most important relations for the ancient Maya were usually with their parents, their brothers and sisters, and with their husband or wife. In their inscriptions, the ancient Maya often named at least one of their parents together with their titles.

In the language of the ancient Maya there was no difference between the words for “son” and “daughter.” But they did use different glyphs if they were indicating the relationship with the father, or the relationship with the mother. Here are two common glyphs that were used for the relationships between children and their parents.



yu-ne

son or daughter of (father)



ya-AL

son or daughter of (mother)

Thus, as an example, we can use these glyphs to describe the relationship between a girl named Ana and her brother Alan with their father named Thomas and their mother Maria. Using the glyphs above and the name glyphs that we wrote earlier, we have



Ana



daughter of



Thomas.

For Alan we have



Alan

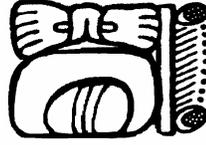


son of



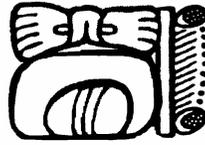
Thomas.

Similarly, the relationships between Ana and Alan and their mother Maria can be written as



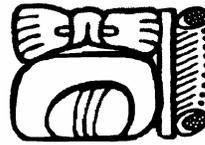
Ana daughter of Maria

and



Alan son of Maria .

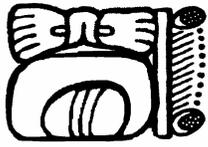
The Maya would also use glyphs to name both their mother and their father. In our example, we would have



Alan son of Maria (and) son of Thomas.

As shown here, when both parents are given, the Maya would list the mother first, and then the father.

One other glyph that is very important is the glyph for one's wife or husband. This glyph is  , *y-atan*, and so we can write



Maria



wife of



Thomas.

Finally, it is important to mention a glyph that is not just for family members, but is used when any two people do something together, or when one person witnesses something done by the

other person. The glyph is *yichnal* , which here is composed of the three parts *yi-chi-NAL*. If for example, if we want to say that Ana did something with her brother, we write



Ana



was accompanied by



Alan.



Mythical fisherman from ancient Tikal



Chapter 4.

Names of Towns

In Maya Glyphs



COMBINING NAMES AND TITLES

In most cases, we can write the name of a town in the same way we write the name of a person. That is, we break the name of the town into Maya syllables (or substitutes), find those syllables in the syllabary, and then place them together in a glyph block in order to spell out the name phonetically.

However, town names often give us the opportunity to be a lot more creative. The best examples are the many towns that are named after saints, and so we can use glyphs for sacred personages to create more interesting ways to write the names of the towns.

For example, many towns start with the word 'San,' for example, San Antonio, San Diego, San Francisco, and Santo Tomas. All these names are Spanish and use 'san' or 'santo' as the male form of 'saint.'

Similarly, there are towns named for female saints such as Santa Catarina and Santa Barbara. Santa is the title for a female saint in Spanish. There are also names like Santa Cruz and Santa Fe, which do not refer directly to saints, but which still contain the word for holy or divine.

Also, of course, there are similar names in English, such as St. Paul, St. Peters, and St. Johns. In each case, the first word of the name means saint, holy, or divine.

A good glyph then for the towns that start with ‘San,’ ‘Santa,’ or ‘St.’ would be the glyph that means Divine One. We already know this glyph because it was one of the titles for people that we looked at in the last chapter.

Thus, for example, take Santo Thomas. In the last chapter we wrote several glyphs for Thomas, so that part is no problem. One very reasonable way then to write the name Saint Thomas is to combine one of the glyphs for ‘Divine One,’ with one of the

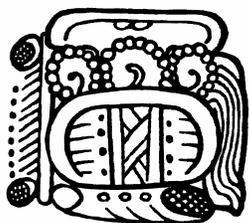
glyphs for Thomas. One way to do this is:  . Of course, there are also other ways to make a glyph for St. Thomas using other ways of writing Thomas and other glyphs for ‘Divine One.’

We can use names of towns to create a title for a person. For example, a title for a person from Saint Thomas could be ‘He/She of St. Thomas.’ To make such a title, we simply combine the glyph for ‘he of’ or ‘she of’ with the glyph for the name of the town. Here is how we can write ‘He of St. Thomas:’



USING LOGOS TO WRITE NAMES OF TOWNS

Some towns offer us a lot of opportunity to be creative. For example, take the town of San Antonio Aguas Calientes, a small Maya weaving town in Guatemala. (In Spanish, Aguas Calientes means ‘hot waters.’) We can quite easily break up the name Antonio into Maya glyphs as *a-n(a)-to-ni-o*, and we have several glyphs for each of these syllables. Here is one way to write Antonio phonetically as *a-n(a)-to-ni-o* :



n(a)
a to ni
o

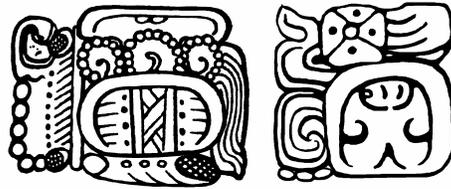
The large glyph in the center is *to*. It is surrounded by *a* (left), *na* (above), *ni* (on the right), and *o* (below).

We can of course write the words ‘Aguas Calientes’ as Maya syllables, spelling the words out phonetically. But, it turns out that there is a glyph which means ‘fiery water place,’ which after all is what ‘aguas calientes’ means. The fiery water place glyph is



. This glyph block is just the glyphs for “fire / fiery” (on the left), “water” (in the center), and “place of” (above). Thus a great

way to write the whole name of the town San Antonio Aguas Calientes is to combine the glyphs for ‘Divine One,’ ‘Antonio,’ and ‘fiery water place.’ If we do this, we get



Another example is Quetzaltenango, the second largest city in Guatemala. To make a glyph for this city, you must understand what the name means. Breaking the word into its two parts gives: quetzal + tenango. The quetzal is the national bird of Guatemala. It lives in the rain forest and has long beautiful blue-green tail feathers. The ancient Maya often used these feathers as decorations and ornaments. The word *tenango* is a word that originated in ancient Mexico that means ‘place of.’ Thus, the name Quetzaltenango means ‘Place of the Quetzal.’

To write the name Quetzaltenango in glyphs, all we have to know are the glyphs for the quetzal bird and the glyph for ‘place of.’ There are glyphs for both. The glyph for ‘place of’ is the logo , and the glyph for quetzal is the pictogram . Putting these two together, we get the glyph for Quetzaltenango:



Like many cities and towns of Mesoamerica, Quetzaltenango also has a pre-Columbian name. The traditional name of Quetzaltenango is Xela, a name that is still used by many people today. We cannot write Xela using logos, but we can write it phonetically.

Normally we would want to divide Xela into two Maya syllables as *xe-la*. But, note that there is no Maya syllable *xe* in the syllabaries. In this case we have to use the rule that we gave earlier: If the consonant you want is in the syllabary, but not with the vowel that you need, use the consonant plus the vowel *a*, then add the vowel that you need. Thus, instead of *xe*, we use the two syllables *xa-e*. So, we write the name Xela as *x(a)-e-la*. Combining the glyphs for the three syllables, we create a glyph for Xela:



Make sure you can find each of the three syllables in the name.

We can use the logo for 'place of' in many names. For example, take the town of Chichicastenango in Guatemala, a town famous for its grand markets and outstanding crafts. As before, we know that *tenango* means 'place of,' and so we only have to write *chichicas* in Maya syllables. We do so as

chi-chi-ka-s(a), and we have glyphs for each of these syllables.

We will use  for *chi*,  for *ka*, and  for *sa*.

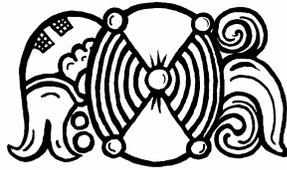
In this case, we can use a new rule in Maya writing. When a Maya scribe wanted to repeat a syllable, he or she could put two small dots to the left of the glyph. Thus, one quite beautiful way to write the name of Chichicastenango is



Like Quetzaltenango, ‘Chichi’ has a traditional pre-Columbian name, which is Chuwi La. To test your skill with Maya glyphs, try to write this name yourself as the Mayas would have:

chu-wi-la =

As a final example, we take the original name for the town of San Pedro La Laguna, an indigenous Tz’utujil village on the shores of Lake Atitlán in Guatemala. The indigenous name for this village is Tz’unun Ya. Dividing the name into Maya syllables, we have *tz’u-nu-n(u)-ya*. This name can be written with the following beautiful glyph block:



VOCABULARY

There are many examples of town names that we do not have to spell phonetically. Many towns contain words like mountain (or mount), lake, valley, port, east, west, north, south, green, black, white, tree, etc. There are Maya logos for all these words.

In this section, we present many of these logos so that you can use them to write the name of your town. The following glyphs are for words that are often used in the names of towns. But remember, for most words there is no logo. In those cases, you can write the name by writing out the syllables.

Here are some of the most useful glyphs with the ancient Maya words in parentheses:

Mountain or Mt. (*WITZ*): 

Stone or Rock (*TUUN*):  or 

The second glyph has the compliment *ni*.

Lake or Water (*JA'*):



Pond (*NAAB'*):



Also means rain, water, and pool

Opening, Doorway (*PASIL*):



Written in syllables

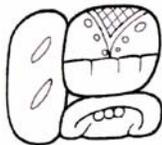
Valley (*YOKIB'*):



Grand, Big (*LAKAM*):



North (*XAMAN*):



Note the complements.

South (*NOHOL*):



A combination of the logogram and phonetic complements.

East (*LAK'IN*):



The logogram plus the complement

Sun (*K'IN*):



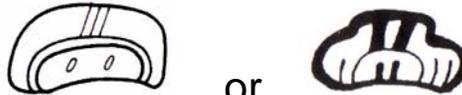
The second glyph has the complement *ni*.

West (*OCHK'IN*):



The hand on top is the verb *Och*, which means 'to enter.' Thus, this glyph literally means 'the sun enters.' As you know, the setting sun looks like it is entering the Earth in the west.

Blue or Green (*YAX*):



This glyph can also mean "blue-green" or "first."

Black (*IK'*):



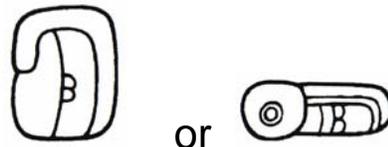
White or Clear (*SAK*):



Red (*CHAK*):



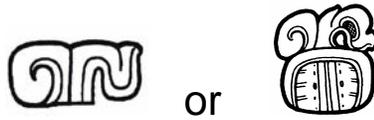
Tree, Wood, or Forest (*TE'*):



New (*TZI*):



Fire or Hot (*K'AK'*):



Earth or Land (*KAB*):



And finally a very important glyph for place names is the logo:

Place of (*NAL*):



The “Place of” glyph is usually, but not always, used as a superscript above the glyph for whatever it is a place of. You can use the logo *NAL* for the names of many cities and towns. In fact it is applicable to any name that ends in -ville, -burg, -ham, -ton, -town, -shire, -hampton, etc.

Keep in mind that you can be creative in making the name of the place you need. For example, if you need a word for Gulf, or Bay, or Sound, you can combine the glyph for 'big' with the glyph for 'lake.' Or if you need the word Port, you can combine 'opening' and 'water.' If you want a glyph for Coast or Shores, you can use the glyph for 'place of' over the glyphs for 'earth' and 'big water' side by side. If you need High, use the glyph for 'mountain.'

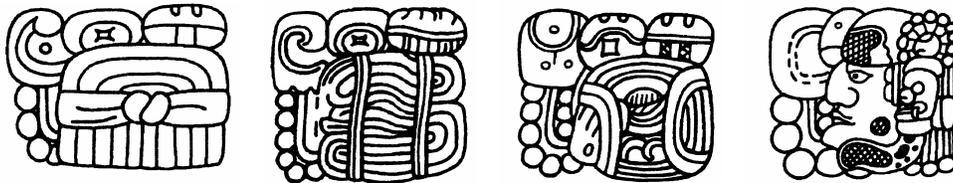
The possibilities are limitless.

GLYPHS OF THE GREAT MAYA CITIES

The Maya built fabulous cities throughout Mesoamerica. The area of the great Maya civilization included all of present-day Guatemala, much of southern Mexico, western Honduras, and parts of El Salvador and Belize. The cities of the ancient Maya were much like the city-states of the ancient Greeks. They would compete and fight among themselves, but they shared a common language, art, and culture.

There were many such Maya cities. In fact, archaeologists are still discovering Maya cities that have long been buried, as well as continuing to uncover and learn about Maya cities that have been known for many years.

Below you will find the “Emblem Glyphs” of many of the great Maya cities. These are not strictly place names, but probably stood for the political unit and perhaps even the ruling family, as well as for the city itself.



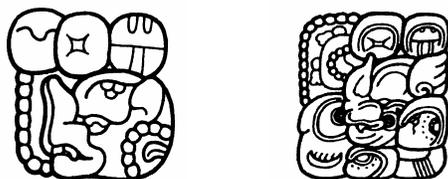
Tikal:

(Guatemala – 4 examples)



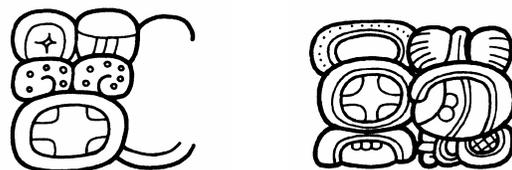
Palenque :

(Mexico – 3 examples)



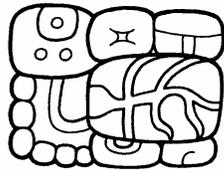
Copán:

(Honduras – 2 examples)



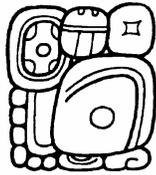
Caracol:

(Belize – 2 examples)



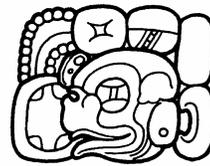
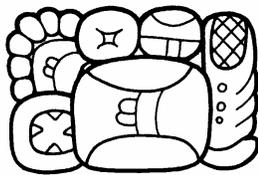
Quiriguá:

(Guatemala – 1 example)



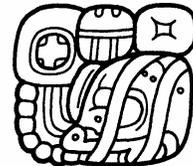
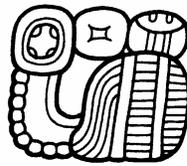
Yaxchilán:

(Mexico – 2 examples)



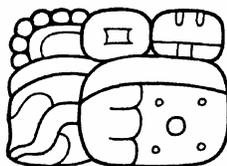
Toniná:

(México -- 2 examples)



Dos Pilas:

(Guatemala -- 3 examples)



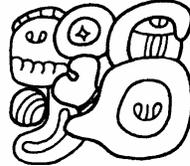
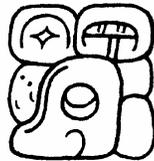
Piedras Negras:

(Guatemala -- 3 examples)



Naranjo:

(Guatemala -- 1 example)



Bonampak:

(Mexico -- 2 examples)



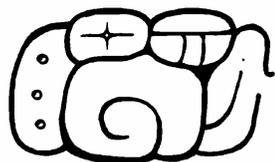
Seibal:

(Guatemala -- 1 example)



Calakmul:

(Mexico -- 1 example)



Altun Ha:

(Belize -- 1 example)

The map below shows each of these cities, as well as other important Maya cities. Make sure you know where each city was located.

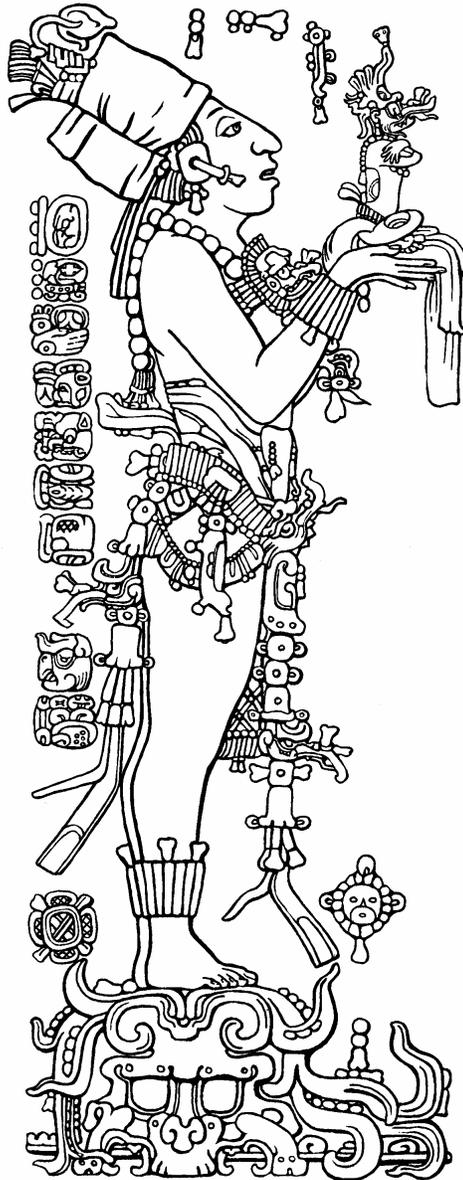




Chapter 5.

Putting It All Together

To Write Simple Sentences



WRITING SIMPLE SENTENCES WITH MAYA GLYPHS

Now we are going to put together many of the pieces of the puzzle that you've learned so far. There's only one more thing you have to learn about Maya glyphs. Reading Maya glyphs is much like reading the newspaper, top to bottom, then left to right -- with one very important difference. Instead of reading down one column at a time, you read across two columns at a time. You read these two paired columns to the bottom, then you go back to the top and read the next two columns from top to bottom. The following diagram shows how this works:

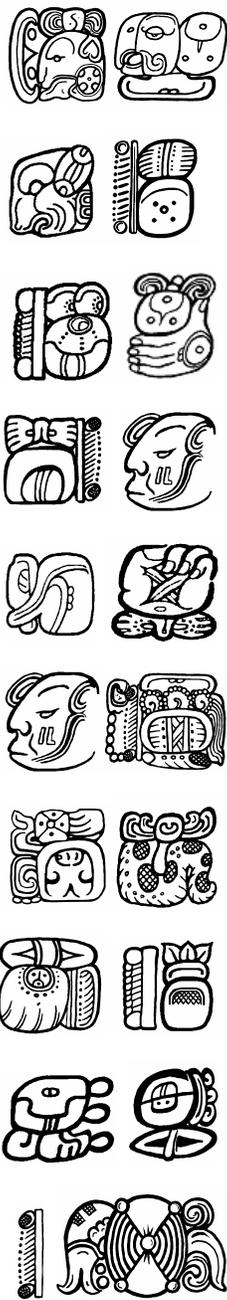


So, let's take two fictional ancient Maya students, Ana and her older brother Alan. Suppose you found their stelae shown below in the jungles of Mesoamerica. All the words on the stelae are words you've seen before. Stop and see if you can decipher what they are telling us about themselves. (It's okay to look back to find the glyphs that you may have forgotten. And don't forget to read the stela in paired columns.)

Ana's stela:



Now, Alan, not to be outdone by his younger sister, writes much more:



In these stelae, as was normal for the ancient Maya, the writer first gives his or her own name and titles, then the mother's name and titles, and then the father's name and titles. Also, as shown here, any reference to one's town usually comes after other titles and descriptions.

Take however much time you need to try to read these stelae on your own, before looking at the answers below...

Okay, here are the translations into everyday English:

Ana says, "***My name is Ana. I am a student. My mother is Maria of San Antonio.***"

Alan says, "***My (his) name is Alan. I am a student and ball player. My mother is Maria, a weaver from San Antonio Aguas Calientes. My father is Thomas, a farmer and wise man, from Tz'unun Ya***"

Simple sentences, beautifully written in Maya glyphs.



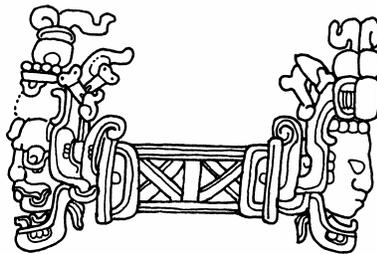
A Beautiful Maya Figurine Made of Clay



Conclusion

We have reached the conclusion our booklet on Maya glyphs. You should now know how to write your name and the names of one or two of your family members in Maya glyphs. You should also know how to write the name of your town. Putting it all together, you can write short sentences in Maya glyphs about yourself and your family.

Continue to study the Maya syllable glyphs and logos and memorize as many of them as you can. We will use them in our continuing study of the ancient Maya.



A ceremonial bar used by Maya kings



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Popol Vuh

Credits for Images

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A Maya King of Copán