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Reconstructing the ideological foundations of classic Maya hieroglyphic writing

The cultural value of writing includes beliefs about how writing should be used—how signs should be formed and assembled into texts, what those texts should document and for whom—that are profoundly ideological. Texts may function as “social facts” that “are used to do things” in the world (Barber 2007: 3; compare Durkheim 1895; Mauss 2002[1925]: 100–103). Such views shape who writes, how they form signs and assemble them into texts, what those texts document, and for whom they are written. Yet writing as a material artifact of these beliefs cannot communicate in a form comparable to spoken or written language. Its meaning is ultimately elicited through individual, symbolic interpretation; written or spoken utterances, in contrast, are by nature intended to convey information and rely on a set of linguistic signs with agreed-upon meaning to do so (Dietler and Herbich 1998: 243–244). Thus, social consequences of variations in Maya hieroglyphic writing arose from the cultural significance assigned to them by users, not from any meaning intrinsic to the glyphs themselves.

In this paper, I examine hieroglyphic, iconographic, linguistic, and archaeological evidence for ideologies of Classic Maya hieroglyphs. Maya hieroglyphic writing was employed across parts of present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador to create texts on stone, bone, pottery, stucco, paper, and other media from at least the third century BCE into the seventeenth century CE. I reconstruct key beliefs about the hieroglyphs among Maya elites during the Classic period (ca. 250–900 CE), including evidence for local diversity in hieroglyphic ideologies throughout the lowlands and their implications for reconstructing scribal communities of practice. Ultimately, I make the case that understanding why scribes used hieroglyphs as they did and what the glyphs meant to them is a necessary prerequisite for considering how and what they wrote with the script.

References

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