

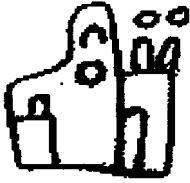
# Olmeac Hieroglyphic Writing

By

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There are two forms of Olmec hieroglyphic writing : the pure hieroglyphics ( or picture signs); and the phonetic hieroglyphics. The phonetic hieroglyphics are a combination of syllabic and logographic signs. Below is an Olmec sign from the Tuxtla statuette:



extensive, pit hole in ground



effective talisman, wonder

making power



this, it



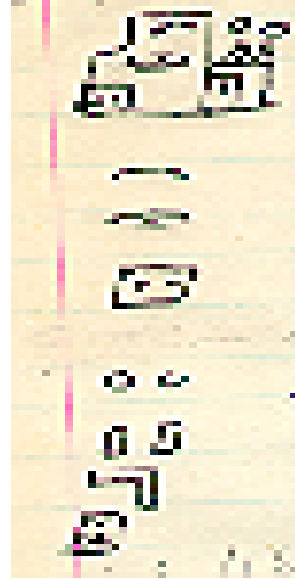
man



great

Translation " Extensive (and) effective wonder making power. This man is great".

To read hieroglyphic Olmec you have to break down the symbols into their phonetic elements. This means that the hieroglyphs are made up of Olmec phonetic signs.



Above you can see how the Olmec signs when broken down into their constituent parts represent Olmec syllabic symbols.

Most of the hieroglyphic Olmec signs are found on the Tuxtla statuette and the Mojarra Stela. Below are some of the most frequent hieroglyphic signs from these monuments.



Su Po ku i-nu , “Offer pure cleansing libations in thou habitation”.



Po ka , “Your pure family mansion ”.



a ta. ni ngba i, “It is here. This it the home of your soul”.



Pe to ta, “The abode of refuge (it) is thrust in the ground here”.



Pè gyo . A kyè ba, “He was (indeed) an important personage (with) considerable and effective wonder making powers.



Po tu fa gyo, “This Holy Ruler possesses the spirit of the divinity”.



Fa po, “(He) is in possession of much purity”.



Po tu, “The pure habitation” or “(He) is the same as purity” or Po tu yo, “The pure refuge of the soul”..



Yu po gbe bi, “Henceforth, the big hemisphere tomb is pure righteousness” or “The soul is sanctified and henceforth holy”.



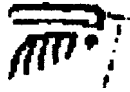
Po bolo ni, “The pure vestibule of Propriety”.



So gap o tu ni, “Give libations at this pure hearth, a refuge of propriety”.



Po bè kpa lu. Tu ta yo, “ Lay low the celebrity with approval. This is a place of refuge for the soul”.



I kyu, “Thou suddenness”.



Ni lu nga ta, “Much propriety glows here”.



Na Tutu, “To touch from a distance Tutu”.



Ku a ti ku to, “He is at the commencement of (re)birth”.



Tu to ta se, “The large hemisphere tomb is a place of rest to be realized here”.



I la gyo, “Thou (art) firmly situated with the divinity”.



Te te “The very honest”.



Po Tutu, “The Holy Tutu”.



Yu i ta, "The big hemisphere tomb is thine".



Tutu, name of personage referred to on the Tuxtla statuette.



"The abode of pure refuge".



Po gbe, "Pure Righteousness".



Da bu po i ki, " At this moment (you are) in a state of retreat—

purty—thou (art) an envoy on a mission".



Bi ki gyo. A mbo. Da bè mbo gyo ni, "The great ancestor (he) works

like a talisman. Indeed (he is) like a raising star. At this moment (he) exist in

parity to a talisman".



Yu yu. Po mi ta. Yu yu, "Offer pure libations (at) this large hemisphere tomb".



Tu ni. Tu ni, "Cause (here) the conferring of all his virtue to this very good abode".



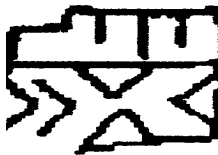
Yo pe, "His vital spirit".



Fe ki po mbo Po so, "The proximity to the pure law is coming out of this pure abode".



Ta ku. Tyu a ki bu, "This place is tops", or "This tomb, it gives messages/law/order".



Tu po gbe ni, "This place of rest is pure righteousness".



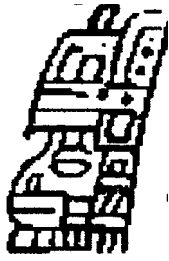
, su, "offer up libations...."



Po mi ta, "This pure place of imbibition".



Po tu ni, "Place of pure propriety".



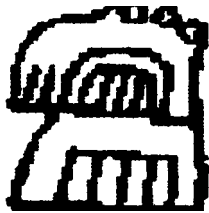
Po nub a-na a pè mbo na bè kye ba nu ni , “His pure soul brings strength. He has assumed the equivalence (to be s divinity). The summit of purity has refuge here. (Here) very much propriety”.



A po mbo kyu Yu yu, “This tomb is as pure as the celebrity inside the tomb”.



Po bè ta, “Exist in a pure unique state”, 1) “Lay low the pure celebrity alone”, 2) “Lay low the pure celebrity to sleep”, 3) “Lay low the pure celebrity in a good situation”.

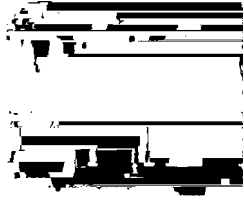


“To realize no vice (at) this habitation”.



A ku po bu mbo gyu, “He is a Governor of gigantic purity, the source of spiritual tranquility” or “He is a pure stem. [He] give(s) a blow to crush evil”.





A Ku ni. Pe gyo po ni, “A vast talisman to confer the fruit of conception”, 2) “He is the summit of the manifestation of life”, 3) A vast talisman is [his] **Ni**, he is the summit of the pure **Ni**.



Bè ta mè, “Exist in a unique state of spiritual tranquility”.



Ki ku lu, “[He will] touch from a distance the Order, to hold it upright”.



Tu ni nit u, “Cause (here) the conferring of all his virtue to this very abode”.



Be fo i, “Thou gives salutations (here) [to the celebrity laid low]”.

The phonetic hieroglyphic Olmec signs do not stand for one word, these signs are Olmec compound symbols organized to make a picture. There are two types of Olmec compound-signs: subordinate and synthetic.

In the subordinate compound signs we see the combining of two or more Olmec base signs or roots representing a noun and a verb. Examples of this

compound type are found in the El Sitio celt and the Tuxtla statuette. Below we find examples of the subordinate Olmec compound signs:



Pè to ta

"The abode of refuge (it) is thrust in the ground".



Pè gyo. A kyè ba

"Extensive (and) effective wonder working power. This man (is) great".



A ku po bu mbo gyu

"It is a pure stem; give a blow to crush evil".

FIG. 4



Figure 25. INCISED JADEITE CELT FROM NEAR EL SITIO  
DEPARTMENT OF SAN MARCOS, GUATEMALA  
At the right are the glyphs that are incised on the back of the celt.  
Height: 27 cm.

### ***El Sitio Celt***

The characters written on the incised jadeite celt from El Sitio, Mexico was written in the hieroglyphic script (Fig. 4). This hieroglyphic writing represents compound syllabic Olmec characters in an ornate style, which probably evolved into the Mayan and Izapán hieroglyphic scripts. This ornate style of writing usually has two or more syllabic signs joined together as illustrated in Figure 4.

#### Transliteration of El Sitio Inscriptions

Po ta tu bè ta

Purity here take refuge Bè sacred object/solitary

tu        to        ta    tu        i  
 Ruler    sequestered    here    place of rest    thou/you  
       fè        bè        gbè        po  
 in the company    unite    the pure    purity  
 po    gba    ta        pè        ta  
 purity    plant    propriety    to spread over    this place  
       se        ta    a    ta  
 to possess for posterity    sacred object    he    this place  
       ma        tu  
 ancestor/lord    rest.

### Translation

"Purity, take refuge here. Bè is here. The Ruler is sequestered (he who was righteous). Here is (his) place of rest. You are in the company (of the Deity). Unite with the purest of the Pure. Plant purity and propriety to spread over this place (and) to possess for posterity. He (is ) a sacred object. This place the Lord rest".

### Vocabulary

po, purity

ta, here, this place; place of rest, rest; Partisan, supporter;

      propriety; to be sacred, sacred object, mystic order;

tu, Ruler, King; take refuge

bè, name; to be, exist; unite

to, sequestered

i, pronominal article, 2nd person, you, thou, thine

fè, in the company

gbè, pure, virtuous, righteous

po, purity, pure, the good

gba, to plant

pè, spacious, pin down; spread over

se, v. to lead; to be in possession for posterity

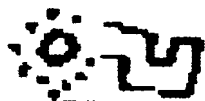
a, pronominal article, 3rd person, he, she, it

ma, Lord, ancestor

The synthetic Olmec compound signs represent a compound expression.

These signs reflect a complete sentence. In the synthetic compound we have VO type sentence as opposed to the SOV type sentence associated with Olmec subordinate compound signs.

Below are several examples:



Bè ta mè

"Exist in a unique state of comprehension". Or



Bè ta gyu

"Exist in a unique state of spiritual  
tranquility".



ki ku lu

" Send away the personal character". or

"Send away the personality to the family  
habitation".



Po be ta

Purity exist here. or



Be ta

- (1) Lay low the celebrity alone
- (2) " " " " in a good situation
- (3) " " " " to sleep
- (4) " " " " a sacred object

Olmec hieroglyphic signs also appear on the jaguar stucco pyramids and inside the Preclassic tombs discovered under them. The Olmec hieroglyphic signs are

seen in the panels of the first temple of Cerros, Structure 5C (Schele & Freidel, 1990).





There are two panels at the Cerros pyramid the Eveningstar panel and the Morningstar panel. On the top of the head of the Evening-star jaguar and the morning star jaguar stucco mask at cerros we have the Olmec sign of lineage **bi**. In Olmec **bi**, means 'today, present, moment, lineage'. But the symbols on either side of the Eveningstar and morning star panel are different.

Some of the earliest Mayan pyramids, like the ones at Cerros and Tikal are built over earlier pyramids which may have been built by the Olmec. One of the most interesting artifacts from the Tikal pyramid is the greenstone pectoral.



*Greenstone Pectoral mask*



The headband glyph  found greenstone pectoral from Tikal, and in the Tuxtla statuette inscription is very interesting. The headband glyph includes three Olmec signs **Bi** , **Ta** , **Po** . As a result from right to left we read the following signs on the headband of this dignitary from Tikal: **Po Bi ta. Po ta**, or **"Pure lineage and Propriety. Pure Propriety"**.

The decipherment of the Olmec writing indicates that the common people visited the Cerros pyramid and other burial sites to offer libations, and obtain

blessings from the personages buried therein. To denote the divine status of many temples the Preclassic Maya-Olmec folk left inscriptions with the **Su ba Su** glyph. In the following figure, we have five examples of the **Su ba Su** or **Tu Su ba Su** sign from 1) Tuxtla statuette, 2) Cerros, 3) Rio Azul and 4) Tikal.

The translation of these signs are below:

1. Su su, "Offer up Many libations".

2. Su ba Su, "Offer libations to this unique Ba.(Headdress glyph:

**Ga po bi ta po ga**, "The habitation is pure, the great ancestor/or lineage has propriety, (indeed) a pure habitation" (after this sign we see the Su ba su sign repeated.)

3. Pe Se su ba su, "Pe to realize in this house the offering of

libations (for) his Ba, offer libations"

4. Se tu ni Se, "To realize this very good abode--merit

be fo li, Lay low (the celebrity) cause (him to) rest

(herein) indeed.

Su ba su, Give libations (for) the Ba, offer the libations.

5. Yo kele nde. Pa fe yo. Su ba kele su. The vital spirit is unique

indeed. Very much admiration the desire of this spirit. Give libations

(for) this unique Ba! Give libations.

Other Olmec signs at Cerros include:

**Tu fa ta su** sign.

This sign is made up of

tu



fa

ta

su

It means in Olmec "This abode possessed by the Partisan (of the Mystic order) offer libations". This sign is related to other Olmec symbolism from sites in Mayaland including Kaminaljuyu and Izapa. The signs from these sites is formed by three signs.

The sign is formed by the following signs:

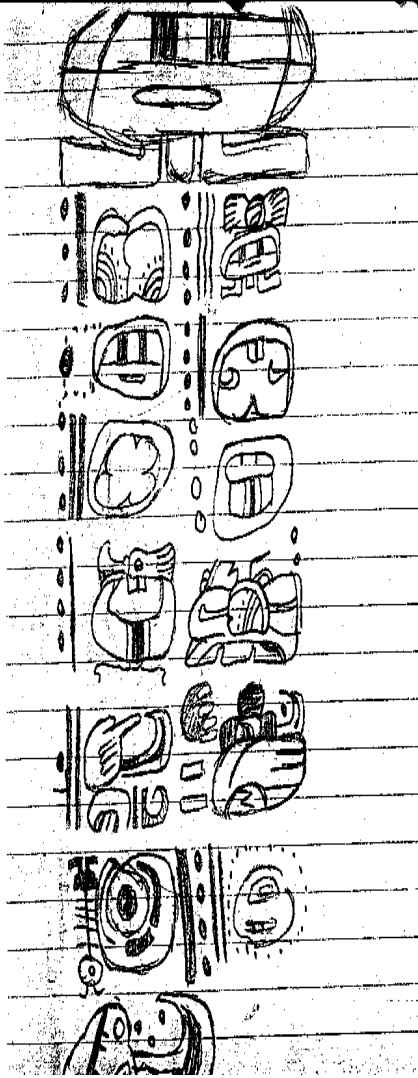
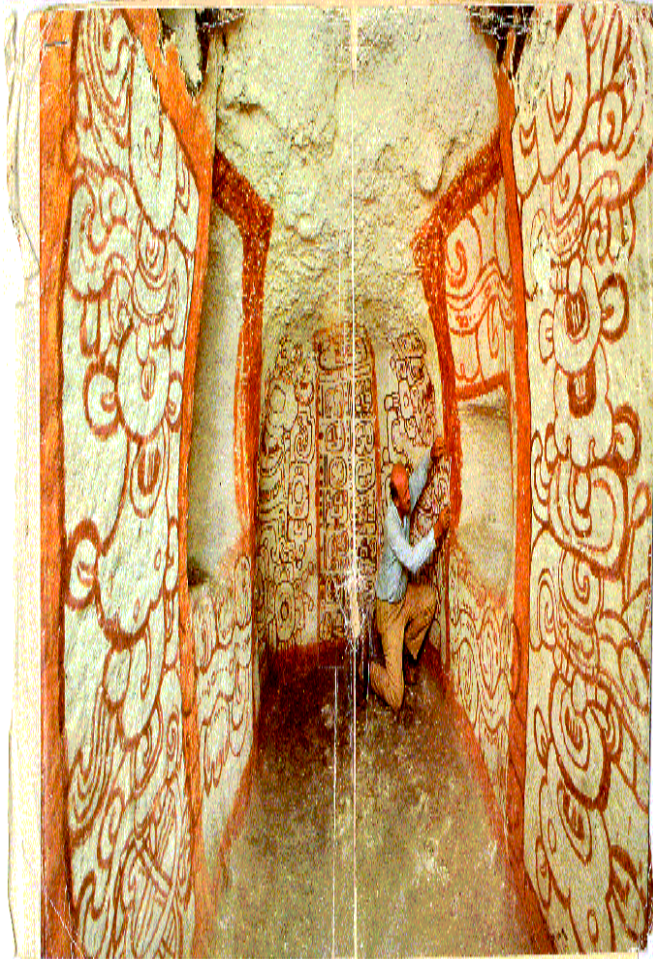
tu

fa

be

It means "This abode the possession of a celebrity laid low (here).

An understanding of the Olmec writing allows us to read the obituary in chamber burial 48 of Tikal, Structure 5D-33-2nd; and the Rio Azul inscription. An examination of these inscriptions will show that the glyphs on lines 1,2,3, and 8(a) agree with similar signs on the Tikal inscriptions.



**Rio Azul Inscriptions**

umop

① *ki*, means to look at  
also means *ki*, like *regard*;  
to *gaze*, *contemplate*, *regard*

*fe*  
empty  
void of breath  
"This man is *out of*  
breath"  
(He goes) to meet *the*

The Jaguar god  
(of the underworld)

*te*  
*ba*  
"He is no longer  
alive" or  
"Possible righteous  
ness"

*be*  
*ti*  
"His place of rest  
exist here"

*ki*

*a*  
*ni*  
*ga*  
*fe*

*ti*

*a be ki*  
1. They exist incomplete  
*ce ni ga fe*  
2. He is the manifestation  
life of *ahau* in this  
manifestation  
*ti-ti*  
"went back to his habitat"

### Bilingual Mayan Olmec Inscription

In the figure above, we illustrate how you can read Mayan inscriptions using the phonetic approach, based on interpreting the sound value based on the Olmec-Manding sign, but read in the Yucatec language.

The sign **ah po** or ahau, is a good example of the use of Olmec symbols to write Mayan words. This sign which Schele and Freidel interpret as: is made up of three Olmec signs Tu tu and po. In Olmec these signs mean Tu tu "the ruler that rules" and Po 'pure', i.e., 'Pure ruler that rules'.

In conclusion, the Olmec people had both a syllabic and hieroglyphic script. The terms in this writing are monosyllabic and each term may have multiple meanings. The Olmec terms have been interpreted using the Manding lexical items recorded by Delafosse, in La Langue Mandigue et ses dialectes.

The Olmec inscriptions on portable items such as incised celts and scepters were sacred relics, containing the obituaries of great rulers, talismanic messages, or symbols of authority. These inscriptions indicate that the Olmec or Xi people were very religious and that the tombs and graves of Xi dignitaries served both as a talisman, and shrine for the common people.

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