

# MESOAMERICAN WRITING SYSTEMS

ARKY 511 - Winter 2008  
Prof. Geoffrey McCafferty  
Office ES 858, ext. 6364  
Email: [mccaffer@ucalgary.ca](mailto:mccaffer@ucalgary.ca)  
Office hours: Mon 10-12

Archaeologists derive information about past cultures using a variety of evidential materials, including artifacts, architecture, and texts. This class will explore the range of information available using textual materials from pre-Columbian and early Colonial Mesoamerica. Mesoamerica comprises the cultural regions of central, southern, and eastern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and Honduras (and Nicaragua for a few of us); it includes such culture groups as the Olmec, Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec, Cholultec, and Aztec. Over a period of at least 2000 years these groups devised a number of writing systems—some related and some unique.

ARKY 511 will introduce students to linguistic elements of the Mesoamerican culture area and some fundamentals behind the role of “writing” in cultural complexity. Following this introduction, students will study the writing systems of the Maya, Teotihuacan, Zapotec, Mixtec, and Aztec (and probably some others sprinkled in). The goal of this survey is to instruct on the value of epigraphic analysis, the range of information available through textual sources, and the steps followed in formulating epigraphic interpretations.

The course will include readings by prominent scholars involved in text-aided archaeology in Mesoamerica, and experiential learning of the methodologies involved in decipherment and interpretation. The University of Calgary has a distinguished history in the study of Mesoamerican writing systems through decades of research by scholars such as David Kelley and Peter Mathews. The class will include guest lectures by Karen Bassie, a prominent scholar in Maya studies.

## REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:

As this course blends academic study of the literature on writing systems as well as experiential learning, grades will be based on examinations, practical quizzes, and a research paper, as follows: midterm exam (20 pts), final exam (20 pts), Maya quiz (10 pts), Mixtec quiz (10 pts), research paper (40 pts). Exams will be take-home essays based on the readings.

Individual grades will be based on total points received:

97-100 = A+	87-89 = B+	77-79 = C+	67-69 = D+
93-96 = A	83-86 = B	73-76 = C	60-66 = D
90-92 = A-	80-82 = B-	70-72 = C-	
Less than 60 points = F			

## RESEARCH PAPERS

A research paper (10-12 pages) is required for the class. Paper topics may include more detailed investigations of particular writing systems, original interpretations of texts, or critical evaluations of specific themes; topics should be cleared with the professor in advance. Referencing format **must** follow that of the journal *Ancient Mesoamerica*.

**IMPORTANT:** Plagiarism, defined as copying more than 5 words in succession or using information without adequate citation (i.e., reference and page number) of the original source, is a violation of academic integrity. Research papers that plagiarize will receive a 0 score, and the student will be turned in to the Dean of Social Sciences (see page 49 of the U of Calgary Calendar).

## READINGS AND TEXTS

*Mesolore*, by Liza Bakewell and Byron Hamann. CD-ROM, Brown University 2001.

*Reading the Maya Glyphs*, by Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone. Thames and Hudson, London. 2001.

There will also be a selection of articles that will be available on Blackboard. Note that many of these are available on-line in the *Mesolore* library:

Bassie, Karen

1991 Chapter Two: The Relationship Between Text and Image. In *From the Mouth of the Dark Cave: Commemorative Sculpture of the Classic Maya*, pp. 38-76. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Berlo, Janet Catherine

1989 Early Writing in Central Mexico: *In Tlilli, In Tlapalli* before A.D. 1000. In *Mesoamerica After the Decline of Teotihuacan*, edited by Richard A. Diehl and Janet Catherine Berlo, pp. 19-47. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

Boone, Elizabeth Hill

1994a Introduction: Writing and Recording Knowledge. In *Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo, pp. 3-26. Duke University Press, Durham, NC and London, UK.

1996 Manuscript Painting in Service of Imperial Ideology. In *Aztec Imperial Strategies*, edited by Frances F. Berdan, Richard E. Blanton, Elizabeth Hill Boone, Mary G. Hodge, Michael E. Smith, and Emily Umberger, pp. 181-206. Dumbarton Oaks Library and Collection, Washington, D.C.

2000 Chapter 9: Histories with a Purpose. In *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs*. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.

Conley, Tom

- 1992 De Bry's Las Casas. In *Amerindian Images and the Legacy of Columbus*, edited by René Jara and Nicholas Spadaccini, pp. 103-131. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Dakin, Karen and Soren Wichtman  
 2000 Cacao and Chocolate: A Uto-Aztecan Perspective. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 11: 55-75.
- Dibble, Charles E.  
 1971 Writing in Central Mexico. In *Handbook of Middle American Indians, Volume 10; Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica, Part 1*, edited by Gordon. F. Ekholm and Ignacio Bernal (Robert Wauchope, General Editor), pp. 322-332. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.
- Hamann, Byron  
 1997 Weaving and the Iconography of Prestige: The Royal Gender Symbolism of Lord 5 Flower's / Lady 4 Rabbit's Family. In *Women in Prehistory: North America and Mesoamerica*, edited by Cheryl Claassen and Rosemary A. Joyce, pp. 153-172. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Houston, Stephen D.  
 1988 The phonetic decipherment of Mayan glyphs. *Antiquity* 62: 126-35.  
 1994 Literacy Among the Pre-Columbian Maya: A Comparative Perspective. In *Writing Without Words*, edited by W. D. Mignolo and E. H. Boone, pp. 27-49. Duke University Press, Durham.  
 2000 Into the Minds of Ancients: Advances in Maya Glyph Studies. *Journal of World Prehistory* 14(2): 121-201.
- Houston, Stephen, John Robertson, and David Stuart  
 2000 The Language of Classic Maya Inscriptions. *Current Anthropology* 41:321-356.
- Houston, Stephen and David Stuart  
 1989 The Way Glyph: Evidences for "Co-essences" among the Classic Maya. *Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing*, No. 30. Center for Maya Research, Washington, D.C.
- Jansen, Maarten  
 1988 The Art of Writing in Ancient Mexico: An Ethno-iconological Perspective. *Visible Religion* 6: 86-113.  
 1990 The Search for History in the Mixtec Codices. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 11: 99-112.  
 1992 Mixtec Pictography: Conventions and Contents, edited by V.R. Bricker, *Handbook of Middle American Indians*. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.
- Justeson, John S. and Kaufman, Terrence  
 1993 A decipherment of Epi-Olmec Hieroglyphic Writing. *Science* 259: 1703-11.  
 1997 A newly discovered column in the hieroglyphic text on La Mojarra Stela 1: A test of the Epi-Olmec Decipherment. *Science* 277: 207-210.

- King, Mark B.  
 1990 Poetics and Metaphor in Mixtec Writing. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 1: 141-151.
- Langley, James C.  
 1994 Symbols, Signs, and Writing Systems. In *Teotihuacan: Art from the City of the Gods*, edited by Kathleen Berrin and Esther Pasztory, pp. 128-139. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.
- Lastra, Yolanda  
 2001 Linguistics. In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, editor-in-chief David Carrasco, pp. 123-131, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.
- Leibsohn, Dana  
 1994 Primers for Memory: Cartographic Histories and Nahuatl Identity. In *Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo, pp. 161-187. Duke University Press, Durham, NC and London, UK.
- Marcus, Joyce  
 1992 Chapter 2: The Evolutionary Context of Early Writing. In *Mesoamerican Writing Systems: Propaganda, Myth, and History in Four Ancient Civilizations*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.  
 1995 Maya Hieroglyphs: History or Propaganda? In *Research Frontiers in Anthropology*, edited by C.R. Ember, M. Ember, and P. Peregrine, pp. 1-24. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Méluzin, Sylvia  
 1992 The Tuxtla Script: Steps Toward Decipherment Based on La Mojarra Stela 1. *Latin American Antiquity* 3(4): 283-97.
- McCafferty, Geoffrey G.  
 2000 The Cholula Massacre: Factional Histories and Archaeology of the Spanish Conquest. In *The Entangled Past: Integrating History and Archaeology* edited by Matthew Boyd, John C. Erwin, and Mitch Hendrickson, pp. 347-359. Proceedings of the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Chacmool Archaeological Conference, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.
- McCafferty, Sharisse D. and Geoffrey G. McCafferty  
 2006 Weaving Space: Textile Imagery and Landscape in the Mixtec Codices. In *2001: An Odyssey of Space*, edited by Elizabeth Robertson, Deepika Fernández, and Marc Zender. Proceedings of the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Chacmool Conference, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB.
- Monaghan, John  
 1994 The Text in the Body, the Body in the Text: The Embodied Sign in Mixtec Writing. In *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, edited by E.H. Boone and W.D. Mignolo, pp. 161-187. Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- Pohl, John M.D.  
 1994 Mexican Codices, Maps, and Lienzos as Social Contracts. In *Writing Without*

- Words*, edited by E.H. Boone and W.D. Mignolo, pp. 137-160. Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- N.d.a Learning How to Read Mixtec Codices. In *The Codices*. Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.  
<http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/index.html>
- N.d.b Codex Borgia and the Mixteca-Puebla Style. In *The Codices*. Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.  
<http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/index.html>
- Quiñones Keber, Eloise  
1995 Section 3: The Historical Annals. In *Codex Telleriano-Remensis: Ritual, Divination, and History in a Pictorial Aztec Manuscript*. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.
- Reents-Budet, Dorie  
1998 Classic Maya Painted Ceramics and the Stories They Tell. In *Maya*, edited by Peter Schmidt, Mercedes de la Garza, and Enrique Nalda, pp. 270-295. Rizzoli International, New York, NY.
- Smith, Mary Elizabeth  
1994 Why the Second Codex Selden was Painted. In *Caciques and Their People: A Volume in Honor of Ronald Spores*, edited by Joyce Marcus and Judith Francis Zeitlin, pp. 111-141. Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.
- Stuart, David  
1987 Ten Phonetic Syllables. *Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing 14*. Center for Maya Research, Washington, D.C.  
1990 The Decipherment of Directional Count Glyphs. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 1(2): 213-224.
- Stuart, George E.  
1992 Quest for Decipherment: A Historical and Biographical Survey of Maya Hieroglyphic Investigation. In *New Theories on the Ancient Maya*, edited by E.C. Danién and R. J. Sharer, pp. 1-63. University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Taube, Karl  
2000 *The Writing System of Ancient Teotihuacan*. Ancient America, volume 1. Center for Ancient American Studies, Barnardville, NC. And Washington, D.C.
- Umberger, Emily  
2007 The Metaphorical Underpinnings of Aztec History: The Case of the 1473 Civil War. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 18 (1): 11-30.
- Urcid, Javier  
2001 *Zapotec Hieroglyphic Writing*. Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology, No. 34. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C.

Vail, Gabrielle

2000 Pre-Hispanic Maya Religion: Conceptions of Divinity in the Postclassic Maya Codices. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 11: 123-148.

Whittaker, Gordon

1992 The Zapotec Writing System. In *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians: Epigraphy*, edited by Victoria R. Bricker, pp. 5-19. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.

## COURSE OUTLINE:

Week 1 (1/14-18) - Introduction to Mesoamerican writing systems

Classwork: Slide presentation on Mesoamerican culture history with emphasis on writing systems

Week 2 (1/21-25) - Linguistics and Epigraphic Theory

Reading: Boone 1994; Dakin and Wichtman 2000; Jansen 1988, Lastra 2001; Marcus 1992, chap. 2

Week 3 (1/28-2/1) - Epi-Olmec and Zapotec writing

Readings: Justeson and Kaufman 1993, 1997; Meluzin 1992; Urcid 2001, chaps. 2 and 6; Whittaker 1992

Week 4 (2/4-8) - Introduction to Maya writing

Readings: Coe and Van Stone 2001, chap. 1; Houston 2000; Houston, Robertson, and D. Stuart 2000; G. Stuart 1992

Week 5 (2/11-15) - How to read Maya writing

Readings: Bassie 1991, chap. 2; Coe and Van Stone 2001, chaps. 2 and 3; Houston 1988; D. Stuart 1987, 1990

Week 6 (2/18-22) - Reading Week, no classes

Week 7 (2/25-29) - Describing the Natural World

Readings: Coe and Van Stone 2001, chaps. 4-10; Houston 1994; Reents-Budet 1998

Week 8 (3/3-7) - Describing the Supernatural

Readings: Coe and Van Stone 2001, chaps. 11-12; Houston and Stuart 1989; Vail 2000

Classwork: Maya QUIZ and distribute MIDTERM EXAM

Week 9 (3/10-14) - Teotihuacan

Readings: Berlo 1989; Langley 1994; Taube 2000

Classwork: Guest lecture on Xochicalco texts by Dr. David Kelley

Week 10 (3/17-21) - Introduction to Mixtec Codices

Readings: *Mesolore* Introductions, Lecture by Aurora Pérez and Maarten Jansen;  
Jansen 1992

Week 11 (3/24-28) - How to Read Mixtec Codices

Readings: *Mesolore* Reading Images; Pohl n.d.a

Week 12 (3/31-4/4) - Interpreting Mixtec Codices

Readings: Hamann 1997; Jansen 1990; King 1990; McCafferty and McCafferty  
2006; Monaghan 1994

Classwork: Mixtec Quiz

Week 13 (4/7-11) - Colonial Codices

Readings: Boone 1996; Dibble 1971; Leibsohn 1994; Pohl 1994, n.d.b;  
Quiñones Keber 1995, Section 3; Smith 1994; Umberger 2007

Week 14 (4/14-18) - Mesoamerican Writing and Historical Agency

Readings: Boone 2000, chap. 9; Conley 1992; Marcus 1995; McCafferty 2000;  
*Mesolore* Debate: History or Propaganda?