Anthropology ANTH1650

ANCIENT MAYA WRITING

MWF 11:00 – 11:50 / Rhode Island Hall Room 008

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Course link: https://canvas.brown.edu/
Pay close attention to this, as it contains crucial materials for the course.

Course Orientation

The native peoples of the New World developed several writing systems, including Zapotec, Isthmian, Mixteca-Puebla, and Maya. Of these, Maya script was by far the most complex. Scholars know of over 800 signs or "glyphs" -- many of which you will learn in this course--that are embedded in a highly esoteric calendrical system. Such writing is necessarily difficult to decipher. It has taxed many fine minds (and some bad) over the last century or so, and is only now beginning to yield many of its deepest secrets.

Some scholars assert that as many as 600 to 800 glyphs have been deciphered. This estimate may be somewhat high, yet virtually all epigraphers (those who study ancient writing) believe we are working at a momentous time: this is the “golden age” of Maya decipherment. Recent decipherments, some only a few years old, explain a good deal of the complexity, nuance, and technical virtuosity of Maya writing. For the first time, the elite-centered world of Maya civilization is coming into clear focus. Evidence and evidence harvested of what it means from an anthropological perspective. This course will deal with such important developments, along with the basics that allow you to evaluate them.

Course Objectives

The principal objective of the course is to show that Maya epigraphy is something you can learn and appraise, that the self-representations of ancient peoples are accessible and understandable, and that
these sources offer vast information for anthropological comparison between writing systems and civilizations in other parts of the world. The study of Maya glyphs is a discipline with its own methods, logic, conventions, and background knowledge, which should become familiar to you by the end of the course. In practical terms, you should eventually be able to read and record a text, establish its clause structure, decipher the accompanying dates, and suggest ways of establishing the meaning or reading of unknown elements. Specifically, you should acquire...

- a grounding in the units and spelling of the glyphs, with an understanding of phoneticism and distributional analysis;
- an idea of how we construe meaning from glyphs, and what constitutes the limits of inference;
- an understanding of Maya records of time.

In general terms, you should leave this course with a sound knowledge of the state-of-the-art in Maya glyphic decipherment and its implications for revised understandings of Maya civilization. Much of what you learn will be unpublished or available only to small groups of specialists – the purpose behind this course is to democratize what seems at first an esoteric branch of knowledge.

**Course Structure**

Anthro. 1650 will be conducted as both a lecture series and an opportunity for interaction with the professor. It will push you very hard and require memorization of characters. The course will be divided into several parts, ranging from "background," which introduces general topics related to Maya script, to the self-explanatory structure and content. The first part is perhaps the most “anthropological” and comparative component of the course. Depending on depth of discussion, the course can sometimes fall behind the schedule below. (There is much to cover!) We will take stock every 2-3 weeks, and readings and topics may be reassessed accordingly. The schedule of projects and quizzes will always remain the same, as will the readings for graduate students.

**Readings**

Each of the assigned texts offers different, and often complementary, perspectives on Maya writing and its decipherment. Most of the books are now available in the Brown bookstore. Those not available at this time will be made accessible to you by other means.

- *Breaking the Maya Code, 3rd ed.*, by Michael D. Coe. (BMC)
  A gripping tale of decipherment, opinionated and (perhaps because of this) entertaining to read. Concentrates on Eric Thompson and his critics, and ends with a review of the most recent decipherments.

- *Reading the Maya Glyphs, 2nd ed.*, by Michael D. Coe and Mark van Stone (RMG)
A summary of the structure and content of Maya writing. Be sure to do the problems in the book, which also provides a key on 169-171. Written for a lay audience, with good examples. Not always correct in all its details, though!

- **Classic Maya Placenames (PL Graduate Students only)**

The discovery of place names and geography in Maya texts.

- **Reading Maya Art, by Stone and Zender. (SZ)**

A splendid book that explores the indissoluble bond between Maya writing and imagery – Egyptian hieroglyphs are the closest analogy in that respect.

- **Collected papers. (CP): on electronic reserve, for Graduate Students and those who wish to know more!**

A collection of essays that are difficult to find: some will be quite specialized but warrant the effort – these are the primary sources on recent technical advances. Only the Grad Students will be required to do these readings, but I suggest that all students take a look at them.

There are other texts which serious students may wish to buy. A primer is available on-line. Solid, not all I agree with: [http://www.wayeb.org/download/resources/wh2011english.pdf](http://www.wayeb.org/download/resources/wh2011english.pdf). Again, this is mostly for graduate students. One is Thompson's A Catalog of Maya Hieroglyphs (University of Oklahoma Press, PM3962 .T45). Despite its defects, the Catalog is the key index for Maya glyphs, and will help systematize your knowledge of the signary. A new source is out with an idiosyncratic system that few of us will ever use (M. Macri and M. Looper, 2003, *The New Catalog of Maya Hieroglyphs, Volume 1: The Classic Period Inscriptions*, U of Oklahoma Press, 1-SIZE F1435.3.W75 M33 2003); with Volume 2 just out, on the codices. Be aware of it, but with caveats. Some may also wish to order volumes of the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* [http://peabody.harvard.edu/CMHI/](http://peabody.harvard.edu/CMHI/); with Volume 2 [2-SIZE F1435.3.P6 C65]. The University of Texas-Austin used to produce “Texas Notes” on Maya subjects; somewhat out-of-date, but easily available at: [http://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/15040/browse?type=title](http://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/15040/browse?type=title). The [www.famsi.org](http://www.famsi.org) has several useful resources, but especially, by the late John Montgomery: [http://www.famsi.org/mayawriting](http://www.famsi.org/mayawriting) -- it has an on-line glyph dictionary. A more recent compendium, easily downloadable, may be found in: [http://www.mesoweb.com/resources/handbook/WH2008.pdf](http://www.mesoweb.com/resources/handbook/WH2008.pdf). I do not agree with all of it, especially some of the readings or spelling conventions.

Web links of use:

- [www.famsi.org](http://www.famsi.org) (reports, bibliography, database of pottery texts – indispensable)
- [www.mayavase.com](http://www.mayavase.com) (large collection of roll-out photographs of Maya ceramics, many with texts)
- [http://mayanewsupdates.blogspot.com/](http://mayanewsupdates.blogspot.com/) -- links to on-line dictionaries, also to calendar-resources (somewhat inactive)
Date calculators (ignore the New Age-ism, see also *Reading the Maya Glyphs*, p. 167-168; also, epigraphers have begun to favor a 584286 “correlation constant”):

http://research.famsi.org/date_mayaLC.php (easiest to use)
http://www.pauahtun.org/Calendar/tools.html (most complete, easy too)
http://www.mayadate.org/ (non-Mac)
http://www.hermetic.ch/cal_sw/maya/mgc.htm

Course Requirements

Readings: All readings should be done *before* class. The total is c. 40 pp. a week for undergraduates.

Lectures: Class attendance is mandatory, please. Study previous class notes before coming to every class.

Quizzes: Students will be tested every week, mostly on sequent Fridays, with exceptions noted below -- please observe the dates carefully! There will be a special emphasis on the identification of glyphs (a list of which will be distributed after every quiz, for testing in the following week) and on the understanding of important concepts. 12 quizzes; 5% each, 60% of your grade. One suggestion: buy a pack of plain notecards, draw glyphs on one side, readings on the other. These will help you memorize important signs. I advise *drawing* the signs yourself, rather than doing mere photocopying: this will help you remember signs and understand Maya calligraphic practice. Think about the difference between carved and painted forms.

Quizzes will be given on the following days: (1) Sept. 18, Fri; (2) Sept. 25, Fri; (3) Oct. 2, Fri; (4) Oct. 9, Fri; (5) Oct. 16, Fri; (6) Oct. 23, Fri; (7) Oct. 30, Fri; (8) Nov. 6, Fri; (9) Nov. 13, Fri; (10) Nov. 20, Fri; (11) Nov. 30, Mon. – **note different day of week**!; (12) Dec. 4, Fri.

The material tested includes all material presented *after the* preceding quiz and up to the current one. Readings from the last quiz day up to the day *preceding the* next quiz will also be evaluated. One question will always be review from all preceding material. Quizzes will be given during a half-an-hour window, during the day of the quiz, to be taken by the student at their convenience, from midnight to midnight. Students will log on, and a timer will begin. **Open book, to be done alone**, but I advise studying, as time will be short. Quiz results will be reviewed in the following class.

Glyph projects:
These are for getting your hands dirty! You will be assigned a particular text, with each project addressing some feature of those texts. **These are to be done alone. (Project 1)** You will simply determine what constitutes the text, which glyphs, in which order, what number per glyph block, what segmentation. **(Project 2)** You will analyze the grammar of a text, determine what it is saying, and in what order. **(Project 3)** You will prepare a short essay on what a text tells you about Maya history. Essays will be ca. 5-7 pp. in length, single-spaced, with whatever illustrative material you wish (creatively) to compile. All materials will be on the web-site, and papers should be submitted on web as well.

**Please note:** You can use resources on-line or from class to do this project. But you must not lift solutions from those sources, including readings, dates or interpretations. It should represent your own work, not that of others. Even more explicit: figure out dates, grammar, and historical interpretations on your own. Grad students (see below) will be expected to have a greater engagement with bibliography but should again glean most interpretations from sources available in class.

Project 1, **Due Oct. 5 (M):** Analyzing Text

Project 2, **Due Oct. 26 (M):** Doing Dates

Project 3, **Due Nov. 16 (M):** Constructing “History”

**Final Exam:**

A take-home project, **to be done on your own**, involving commentary on a longer text. You will need to bring all skills to bear from what you’ve learned during the semester. Project to be distributed the last day of class (via web-site), and students will submit the commentary on-line as well. Due on the scheduled day of the final exam, 2/17/2015, 2:00 PM—of course, you are always welcome to submit it before!

**Grad Student Requirements:**

These students will have more reading (listed on separate hand-out), and will be expected to do lengthier, more sophisticated (i.e., more deeply researched, bibliographically trenchant) versions of the Projects or some alternative after discussion with the instructor. They will have to take all quizzes.

**Grading:**

- Quizzes -- 60% (12 x 5% each)
- Projects -- 30% (10% each)
- Final exam -- 10%
- TOTAL 100%
Extra Credit. Students are welcome to do two extra-credit assignments for up to %10 of the final grade (5% each). The assignment will consist of writing up a certain hieroglyphic text. Due on (Dec. 1), without exceptions. The student is not guaranteed full credit for these assignments but must perform to high standard.

Disabilities Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me if you have a disability or other condition that might require accommodations or modification of any of these course procedures. You may speak with me after class or during office hours. For more information contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services at 401-863-9588 or SEAS@brown.edu.


Delvendahl, M. Kuhnert, and A. Schubart, pp. 51-61. Acta Mesoamericana, 10
Markt Schwaben: Verlag Anton Saurwein,

(14) D. Stuart: 1998. 'The Fire Enters his House': Architecture and Ritual in Classic Maya
Texts'. In Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture, ed. by S. D.

(15) D. Stuart: 1999. ‘Arrival of Strangers: Teotihuacan and Tollan in Classic Maya
History’. Mesoamerica's Classic Heritage: Teotihuacán to the Aztecs. David
Press of Colorado.

(16) D. Stuart: 1997. ‘Kinship Terms in Maya Inscriptions’. In The Language of Maya
Hieroglyphs, ed. by Martha J. Macri and Anabel Ford, pp. 1-11. San
Francisco: Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute.


p. 154-175. London: Thames and Hudson.

among the Classic Maya’. Antiquity 70:289-312.

dition of the Sourcebook for the 29th Maya Meetings at Texas, The University of
Texas at Austin.

(22) D. Beliaev, Albert Davletshin, and Alexandre Tokovinine: 2010. ‘Sweet Cacao and Sour
Atole: Mixed Drink on Classic Maya Ceramic Vases’. Ed. J.E. Staller and M.D.
Carrasco (eds.), Pre-Columbian Foodways: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Food,
Culture, and Markets in Ancient Mesoamerica, 257-272. Springer.

(23) S. Martin and N. Grube: 2008, Excerpt, Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens, 2nd ed.
p. 54-67. London: Thames and Hudson.

(24) S. Houston: 2012, ‘All Things Must Change: Maya Writing over Time and Space’ . In
Their Way of Writing, ed. E. Boone and G. Urton. Washington, DC: Dumbarton
Oaks.

(25) S. Martin, in press, Reading Calakmul: Recent Epigraphic Finds of the Proyecto
Arqueológico de Calakmul. Ms. for Mesa Redonda de Palenque (?).

(26) S. Houston, J. Baines, and J. Cooper: 2003, ‘Last Writing: Script Obsolescence in Egypt,
Mesopotamia, and Mesoamerica’. Comparative Studies in Society and History
45(3):430-480.

(27) N. Grube: 2004. ‘The Orthographic Distinction between Velar and Glottal Spirants in
Maya Hieroglyphic Writing’. In The Linguistics of Maya Writing, edited by Søren
Wichmann. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.

(28) S. Houston, J. Robertson, and D. Stuart. 2001. Quality and Quantity in Glyphic Nouns and
Adjectives. Research Reports in Ancient Maya Writing, no. 47. Washington, D.
C.: Center for Maya Research.

(29) S. Martin, in press, ‘The Old Man of the Maya Universe: A Unitary Dimension within


SCHEDULE

Key:  
BMC (Breaking the Maya Code)  
CP (Collected Papers: Graduate Students)  
PL (Classic Maya Place Names: Graduate Students)  
RMG (Reading Maya Glyphs)  
SZ (Reading Maya Art)

PART I  
BACKGROUND and CONTEXT

Sept. 9 (W)  - Introduction: The Study of Maya Writing
Sept. 11 (Fri)  - Origins and Context of Maya Writing  
Reading:  BMC 47-72; CP #1, 2
Sept. 14 (M)  - Development and Extinction  
Reading:  SZ 7-10; CP #3 and 4, also #24, #26
Sept. 16 (W)  - Writing in Maya Society  
Reading:  RMG 94-97; CP #5, 32
Sept. 18 (Fri)  - Media, Craft, and Style  
Quiz 1  
Reading:  RMG 138-154
Sept. 21 (M)  - Settings of Texts  
Reading:  CP #13, 14, 31
Sept. 23 (W)  - History of Decipherment I
Sept. 25 (Fri)  - History of Decipherment II  
Quiz 2  
Reading:  BMC 73-144
Sept. 28 (M)  - History of Decipherment III  
Reading
Sept. 30 (W)  - Writing and Decipherment: Relationship of Writing to Language  
Reading:  PL 2-18
Oct. 2 (Fri)  - Writing and Decipherment: Analytic Techniques of Decipherment  
Quiz 3  
Reading:  BMC 13-46
Part II: STRUCTURE

Oct. 5 (M)  - Graphic components and textual formats
Reading:    SZ 10-28; Begin work drawing, memorizing RMG 161-166!
Project 1 Due – Analyzing Text

Oct. 7 (W)  Project 1 – discussion + workshop

Oct. 9 (Fri) - Logographs
Reading:    RMG 108-136; SZ 60-65, 82-87, 120-127, 142-153; CP #7, 33
Quiz 4

Oct. 12 (M) -- no class!

Oct. 14 (W) - Syllables 1: Discovery and Controversy
Reading:    BMC 145-166; SZ 32-33, 130-131, 220-221– start memorizing RMG; 155-160!; CP #30

Oct. 16 (Fri) - Syllables 2: Proofs and Historical Trends
Reading:    RMG 155-160
Quiz 5

Oct. 19 (M) - Phonology and Introduction to Morphology: Pronouns
Reading:    CP #6, 27; RMG 26-31

Oct. 21 (W) - Phonology and introduction to morphology: Nouns and Adjectives
Reading:    CP #8, 28

Oct. 23 (Fri) - Locatives, prepositions, and agentives
Reading    RMG 35-36
Quiz 6

Oct. 26 (M) - Glyphic Verbs I: Intransitives, Time, Rhetoric
Reading    RMG 31-34
Project 2 Due – Doing Dates

Oct. 28 (W) -- Project 2 discussion + workshop

Oct. 30 (Fri) - Glyphic Verbs II: Transitives and Passives
Reading    RMG 34-35
Quiz 7

Nov. 2 (M)  - Glyphic verbs III: Positionals, Negations, Adverbs
Nov. 4 (W)  - Glyphic Verbs IV: Quotative Expressions and “Folklore”
Reading:    CP # 9

Part III    CONTENT

Nov. 6 (Fri) --Clauses and Discourse
 Quiz 8

Nov. 9 (M)  - Description of the Calendar (with ethnographic background)
Reading      RMG 37-58, 167-168

Nov. 11 (W) - Numbers, Day Names, and Months - The Supplementary Series (with comments on
Maya astronomy)
Reading      CP #10

Nov. 13 (Fri) -The Long Count and its Constituent Cycles / Personal Events
Reading      BMC 231-256; CP #11; RMG 59-67
 Quiz 9

Nov. 16 (M)  - Proper names, titles, and epithets
Reading      BMC 167-216; RMG 74-85
 Project 3 due – Constructing “History”

Nov. 18 (W)  -- Project 3 discussion + workshop

Nov. 20 (Fri) -Places and Sacred Geography
Reading:     PL 19-68; RMG 68-73; SZ 132-141, 168-72
 Quiz 10

Nov. 23 (M)  - Kinship, Courtiers, Women, Children
Reading:     CP #16 and 17; RMG 86-88

Nov. 25 (W)  - The Great Cities of Tikal and Palenque
Reading      CP #12, 15, 18, 19, 23

Nov. 26-29   - Thanksgiving Holiday

Nov. 30 (M)  - Gods
Reading:     CP #20, #29; RMG 108-136; SZ 38-51
 Quiz 11 – note date!
Dec. 2 (W) - Ceramics and name-tagging
Reading: CP # 21, 22, 25, 32; RMG 98-107

Dec. 4 (Fri) - Final Workshop
Quiz 12

Final exam due on scheduled exam day