CHAPTER TWO

COMMUNICATING WITH GODS AND ANCESTORS

Writing in Early Civilization

The basic challenge in studying early writing is not identifying when or where it first appeared but deciding what writing actually is. Myriad definitions have been proposed to explain how writing, which is colloquially understood as the graphic representation of (spoken) language, differs from musical, dance, mathematical, or other graphic notations.[1] Scholars have never seriously challenged the status of alphabets, syllabaries, and other systems that transparently indicate speech sounds, divorced from any particular semantic value, as "writing." Hieroglyphic, (semi-)logographic, and other visually intricate scripts, in contrast, were long considered less evolved, stuck behind the more phonetically transparent systems on a one-way evolutionary street between imagery and writing.[2]

[1] Florian Coulmas, *Writing and Society: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17–18; Peter T. Daniels, *An Exploration of Writing* (Equinox, 2018), 4; Ignace J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing: The Foundations of Grammatology*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1963), 11–20; Geoffrey Sampson, "Writing Systems: Methods for Recording Language," in *The Routledge Handbook of Linguistics*, ed. Keith Allan (Routledge, 2015), 48–50.

[2] Gelb, *A Study of Writing*, 190–205; Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3–56; Havelock, *Literate Revolution*, 60–70; David Sacks, *The Alphabet: Unraveling the Mystery of the Alphabet from A to Z* (Broadway Books, 2003), 5–11; see Thomas B. F. Cummins, "From Many into One: The Transformation of Pre-Columbian Signs into European Letters in the Sixteenth Century," in *Sign and Design: Script as Image in Cross-Cultural Perspective (300–1600 CE)*, eds. Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak and Jeffrey F. Hamburger (Dumbarton Oaks, 2016), 84–86; Houston, "Literacy," 31–34.

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Recently, though, more nuanced discussion has accommodated a wider range of form and functionality in human-made scripts.[3] Today, scholars generally accept that conventionalized systems of graphic notation fall into two categories. The first, semasiographic, denotes systems that are "arranged primarily around nonphonetic principles of ordering" and are interpreted based on "the spatial and/or performative relationships among the constituent elements," such that meaning is not tied to a particular linguistic system.[4] One such script was deployed in the Mixteca area of the Mexican states of Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Puebla, for example, where painters recorded mostly dates and personal, family, and place names that the orator-performer referenced when narrating the history for an audience.[5] Glottographic or lexigraphic systems such as alphabets and syllabaries, in contrast, are closely tied to language and require users to possess the relevant linguistic knowledge to communicate information accurately, even though these systems may contain some semasiographic components as well.[6]

Narrow definitions of "writing" apply the label only to glottographic modes of graphic representation.[7] Broad definitions include both semasiographic and glottographic systems, emphasizing their shared communicative function and conventionalized form without discriminating based on relationship to speech.[8] This flexibility is especially advantageous in contexts such as Mesoamerica because it accounts for the high degree of iconicity and overlap

[3] See Margaret Bender, "Reflections on What Writing Means, Beyond What It 'Says': The Political Economy and Semiotics of Graphic Pluralism in the Americas," *Ethnohistory* 57, no. 1 (2010): 175–82; Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo, eds., *Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes* (Duke University Press, 1994); Elizabeth Hill Boone and Gary Urton, eds., *Their Way of Writing: Scripts, Signs, and Pictographies in Pre-Columbian America* (Dumbarton Oaks, 2011).

[4] Margaret A. Jackson, "The Mediated Image: Reflections on Semasiographic Notation in the Ancient Americas," in *Agency in Ancient Writing*, ed. Joshua Englehardt (University Press of Colorado, 2013), 22; see Barry B. Powell, *Writing: Theory and History of the Technology of Civilization* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 32–37; Geoffrey Sampson, *Writing Systems: A Linguistic Introduction* (Stanford University Press, 1985), 26.

[5] Maarten E. R. G. N. Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, "Mixtec Cultural Vocabulary and Pictorial Writing," in *Linguistics and Archaeology in the Americas*, eds. Eithne B. Carlin and Simon van de Kerke (Brill, 2010), 3–41.

[6] Powell, *Writing*, 36; Sampson, *Writing Systems*, 26; compare Pierre Robert Colas, "Writing in Space: Glottographic and Semasiographic Notation at Teotihuacan," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 22, no. 1 (2011): 13–25.

[7] Coulmas, *Writing and Society*, 16–17; Stephen Houston, "Writing That Isn't: Pseudo-Scripts in Comparative View," *L'Homme* 227/228, no. 3 (2018): 22; Alex de Voogt, "Introducing Writing on Writing," in *The Idea of Writing: Play and Complexity*, eds. Alex de Voogt and Irving Finkel (Brill, 2010), 1–3.

[8] Elizabeth Hill Boone, "Introduction: Writing and Recording Knowledge," in Boone and Mignolo, *Writing*, 15; Elizabeth Hill Boone, "The Cultural Category of Scripts, Signs, and Pictographies," in Boone and Urton, *Their Way*, 379–80; Katarzyna Mikulska and Galen Brokaw, "Homo alphabeticus, la definición de la escritura y las escrituras mesoamericanas," *Revista Española de Antropología Americana* 52, no. 2 (2022): 202–3; Powell, *Writing*, 13.

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with imagery that characterizes the region's autochthonous writing systems.[9] Except in the overview of those traditions (see "Writing in Mesoamerica" below), however, the terms "writing (system)" or "script" as used in this book denote graphic systems that are primarily glottographic in nature. This approach is pragmatic, not ideological: Maya hieroglyphs are, like Egyptian hieroglyphs, Chinese characters, and Mesopotamian cuneiform, intimately tied to language. Cross-cultural comparison with other script traditions is thus most compelling in the case of similarly glottographic systems, even if semasiography has played a significant role in Mesoamerica's long written tradition as well – including in the development of Maya hieroglyphs. A glottographic focus underscores the Maya script's robust capacity to convey complex linguistic messages in graphic form, which made it the most sophisticated among all Mesoamerican systems of graphic notation.

SOCIOPOLITICAL COMPLEXITY AND DEVELOPMENT OF ANCIENT SCRIPTS

For generations, scholars of early civilizations considered the big three of "agriculture, sedentary life, and writing" prerequisites for ancient humans to develop "complex architecture, organisation of labour on a significant scale and elaborated rituals."[10] In recent decades, however, archaeologists have found evidence at Early Neolithic sites such as Göbekli Tepe in southeastern Anatolia, Choghā Mīsh in southern Mesopotamia, or Yuchanyan in southern China, of societies that did not cultivate domesticated crops or live in permanent settlements but nonetheless managed large-scale irrigation projects, crafted ceramics, or built monumental temples.[11] Early civilizations on the Peruvian coast also constructed monumental stone architecture, produced textiles, and carried out long-distance trade for centuries before adopting pottery, which also has long been considered one of the most basic artifacts of ancient life.[12]

[9] Boone, "Cultural Category"; Colas, "Writing in Space," 13–15; Jackson, "Mediated Image," 21–33; see Andrea Stone and Marc Zender, *Reading Maya Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Maya Painting and Sculpture* (Thames and Hudson, 2011).

[10] Juan Carlos Moreno García, "Early Writing, Archaic States and Nascent Administration: Ancient Egypt in Context (Late 4th–Early 3rd Millennium BC)," *Archéo-Nil* 26 (2016): 150; see David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 418–31.

[11] David Joel Cohen, "The Beginnings of Agriculture in China: A Multiregional View," *Current Anthropology* 52, no. S4 (2011): S273–93; Karen Johnson, "Primary Emergence of the Doctrinal Mode of Religiosity in Prehistoric Southwestern Iran," in *Theorizing Religions Past: Archaeology, History, and Cognition*, eds. Harvey Whitehouse and Luther H. Martin (AltaMira Press, 2004); Steven Mithen, "Theorizing Religions Past: Archaeology, History, and Cognition," in Whitehouse and Martin, *Theorizing*.

[12] Richard L. Burger, *Chavín and the Origins of Andean Civilization* (Thames and Hudson, 1992), 27–42.

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Clearly, sedentism and agriculture were not necessary for ancient peoples to achieve complex social organization. Nor was political unification – or even pottery, for that matter – a prerequisite for controlling collective labor. So, how justified is it to continue insisting that state-level administration or at least political centralization necessarily coincided with the emergence of early writing?

The idea that writing's invention was tied to the rise of civilization can be traced back in the anthropological literature to figures such as Edward B. Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, and V. Gordon Childe.[13] Nonetheless, the Eurocentric narratives of cultural evolution to which it belongs are rooted deeper in the early modern and colonial past.[14] Today, few serious academics would deny that the earliest examples of writing in Mesopotamia, China, Egypt, and Mesoamerica are spatiotemporally associated, at least in broad strokes, with archaeological evidence for social complexity, centralization, and urbanism.[15] What remains unresolved is the debate over the nature of the connection between these phenomena: Is it one of simple correlation or of causation? And if the latter – the preferred response among most who have taken an explicit stance on the issue – what is the causation's directionality?

On one extreme is the assertion that political complexity and centralization preceded and fostered the invention of writing. In a widely cited article, Nicholas Postgate and colleagues argue for "a utilitarian, administrative origin" of writing in all four world regions where it was innovated.[16] In their view, writing arose in response to "the needs of administration" within a burgeoning political hierarchy.[17] This "technocratic" perspective casts writing as an effective administrative tool that supported centralization of power and the rise of the state.[18] Other scholars are more agnostic about causation, acknowledging that even if burgeoning political complexity did catalyze writing's creation,

[13] V. Gordon Childe, "The Urban Revolution," *The Town Planning Review* 21, no. 1 (1950): 3–17; Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society* (Charles H. Herr & Company, 1877), 10–12; Edward B. Tylor, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization*, 2nd ed. (John Murray, 1861), 84–107.

[14] Bruce Trigger, "Writing Systems: A Case Study in Cultural Evolution," in Houston, *First Writing*, 40.

[15] Houston, "Archaeology of Communication Technologies"; Law et al., "Writing and Record-Keeping."

[16] Nicholas Postgate et al., "The Evidence for Early Writing: Utilitarian or Ceremonial?" *Antiquity* 69, no. 264 (1995): 478.

[17] Postgate et al., "Evidence," 479; see also Paola Demattè, *The Origins of Chinese Writing* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 266; Hans J. Nissen, "Urbanization and the Techniques of Communication: The Mesopotamian City of Uruk During the Fourth Millennium BCE," in Yoffee, *Cambridge World History*, 128; Ilona Regulski, "The Origin of Writing in Relation to the Emergence of the Egyptian State," in *Egypt at Its Origins 2*, eds. Béatrix Midant-Reynes et al. (Peeters, 2008), 1000, 1001.

[18] Houston, "Archaeology of Communication Technologies," 234.

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early users of writing may not have been conscious of, motivated by, or interested in its potential for management or governance.[19] Yet even this view holds that early writing "depended for [its] existence and perpetuation on the high degree of uniformity and control that cities made available," which was only possible with some sort of centralized administration.[20]

On the other extreme are those who posit an inverse causal relationship, namely that early writing fostered the rise of political complexity and centralization. Some proposals are relatively measured, allowing that "the complex social form of the state – perhaps a regional state rather than a central one – was probably a precondition" for writing's invention but that the latter may also have influenced the former's development.[21] Others are more explicit in claiming that the practice of writing or "texts themselves facilitated state formation, rather than being a result of it" because "the production and storage of texts was an exercise in power."[22]

Assumptions of writing's intimate association with political complexity and centralized authority often hover at the margins of debates about how and why the technology developed when and where it did. In their monumental treatise on the origins of civilization, David Graeber and David Wengrow push back against social historians' long-held belief that writing "developed in the service of impersonal bureaucratic states."[23] In their view, "the first systems of specialized administrative control actually emerged in very small communities," thousands of years before the advent of writing.[24] Yet their globally comparative discussion does not offer an alternative account of why or how the technology developed where and when it did. In characterizing Chavín

[19] Dematté, *Origins*, 353; Gelb, *A Study of Writing*, 62; Massimo Maiocchi, "Writing in Early Mesopotamia: The Historical Interplay of Technology, Cognition, and Environment," in *Beyond the Meme: Development and Structure in Cultural Evolution*, eds. Alan C. Love and William C. Wimsatt (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 408, 412.

[20] Law et al., "Writing and Record-Keeping," 225; see also Haicheng Wang, "Writing and the City in Early China," in Yoffee, *Cambridge World History*, 146–47.

[21] John Baines, *Visual and Written Culture in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 117; see Steven J. Garfinkle, "Ur III Administrative Texts: Building Blocks of State Community," in *The Circulation and Transmission of Cuneiform Texts in Social Space*, eds. Paul Delnero and Jacob Lauinger (De Gruyter, 2015), 144–45; Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (State University of New York Press, 1999), 4; Daniel A. Mullins et al., "The Role of Writing and Recordkeeping in the Cultural Evolution of Human Cooperation," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 90 (2013): S141–51; Haicheng Wang, "Administrative Reach and Documentary Coverage in Ancient States," *Archéo-Nil* 26 (2016): 136–37.

[22] Garfinkle, "Ur III Administrative Texts," 144; see also Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 45–86; Amanda H. Podany, *Weavers, Scribes, and Kings: A New History of the Ancient Near East* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 43–44; Wang, "Administrative Reach."

[23] Graeber and Wengrow, *Dawn of Everything*, 419.

[24] Graeber and Wengrow, *Dawn of Everything*, 420.

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culture on Peru's northern coast from the first millennium BCE, they still cite a lack of writing or "pictorial" representation as "one reason why we can be fairly certain we are not dealing with an actual empire."[25] The implication, of course, is that writing and figural iconography should chronically and socially precede imperial governance.

There is probably no universal resolution to the question of which came first – social complexity or writing? Inevitably, the answer depends on specific circumstances and on "compelling local need(s)" that writing initially fulfilled.[26] In their haste to resolve the debate over writing's origins and the motivations underlying its invention, however, scholars have largely neglected another aspect of writing's history that is at least equally important to understanding its place in early civilization. Unlike countless other technologies that humans have invented and quickly abandoned over our millennia-long history, writing arrived to stay. In ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and Mesoamerica, the newly created communicative tool was adopted and adapted by others who took up and propagated it through practice and exchange. What made writing a technology worth keeping? How did the earliest scripts develop from one-time inventions to shared traditions that remained in use through so many generations?

The answer may seem obvious to us now, living in a civilization that for millennia has depended on writing for essential social functions and, increasingly over the last 600-odd years, for daily life. But the value assigned to a technology after it has long become engrained in a way of life is not necessarily the same value that was ascribed to it upon its inception. Nor do the uses of writing today, thousands of years after our ancestors first created it, reliably explain what motivated others to adopt the novel technology in the distant past. Writing differs from many other technologies in that its very nature requires that it remain coherent *as a system*. In order to communicate successfully, writing's users must agree on the forms and meanings of individual signs and on conventions for when and how to combine them.[27] They do not need to speak the same language. They must, however, share an understanding of how their script relates to speech. Additionally, they need to know how much they can deviate from those norms without jeopardizing a message's intelligibility for its intended recipients.

By and large, discussions about early writing in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and Mesoamerica take for granted the fact that, once invented, it coalesced into a coherent script with which writers could produce texts that readers in

[25] Graeber and Wengrow, *Dawn of Everything*, 387.
[26] Houston, "Archaeology of Communication Technologies," 234.
[27] Houston, "Archaeology of Communication Technologies," 237; Law et al., "Writing and Record-Keeping," 225.

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different moments and places could understand. From this perspective, the only phenomenon that needs explaining is writing's initial creation. Yet this origins-focused model conflates stages of technological development that differ in consequence and nature. It also overlooks the sociological processes of ongoing practice and exchange that, even today, are necessary to maintain writing's functionality over generations.

Unlike relatively recent episodes of script invention – the Cyrillic alphabet, for instance, or the Cherokee or *hangul* syllabaries – creation of writing in early civilizations was not a delineated event.[28] It tended to be "episodic," piecemeal, occurring over a lifetime or two without a clear vision of an end goal or product.[29] At the same time, in contrast to the fragmented but comparatively rapid dynamic of its invention, a novel script's early history, including its propagation and adaptation to spoken language, tended to be defined by "an ultimate homeostasis, where change is much less abrupt with a high degree of conventionalized stability."[30] It was in this relatively stable social environment of widespread, consistent practice that writing developed into something coherent enough to become and remain a "system."

A helpful framework for understanding the trajectory of writing and other human technologies distinguishes between the social phenomena of invention and innovation. Whereas invention describes initial introduction of a new technology, usually by a single individual or small group of collaborators, innovation accounts for the process by which others take up the novelty.[31] Innovation "allow[s] ventures in early writing to survive when their inventors die and their idiosyncratic experiments run the risk of passing away with them."[32] Processes of innovation facilitated regularity in early writing systems by establishing a shared commitment among users to a common mode of graphic information transfer. Since writing is only communicatively useful in

[28] Compare Michael Harbsmeier, "Inventions of Writing," in *State and Society: The Emergence and Development of Social Hierarchy and Political Centralization*, eds. John Gledhill et al. (Unwin Hyman, 1988).

[29] Houston, "Archaeology of Communication Technologies," 238.

[30] John S. Robertson, "The Possibility and Actuality of Writing," in Houston, *First Writing*, 34; see Alex de Voogt, "Invention and Borrowing in the Development and Dispersal of Writing Systems," in *The Idea of Writing: Writing across Borders*, eds. Alex de Voogt and Joachim Friedrich Quack (Brill, 2011), 1–7.

[31] Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th ed. (Free Press, 1995), 11–17; Valentine Roux, "Technological Innovations and Developmental Trajectories: Social Factors as Evolutionary Forces," in *Innovation in Cultural Systems: Contributions from Evolutionary Anthropology*, ed. Stephen J. Shennan (MIT Press, 2010), 217–28; Polly Weissner, "Seeking Guidelines through an Evolutionary Approach: Style Revisited among The !Kung San (Ju/'Hoansi) of the 1990s," *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 7, no. 1 (1997): 157–76.

[32] Houston, "Archaeology of Communication Technologies," 235–36; see Rogers, *Diffusion*, 175; Roux, "Technological Innovations," 227–30.

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the case of mutual legibility, maintaining a script's coherence requires ongoing exchange about its function and form.[33]

This book focuses on writing's coalescence and maintenance as a system, rather than its initial creation. Whereas most scholarship on early writing has profiled its invention or introduction, I consider what happens after a nascent repertoire of signs has been systematized into a script, particularly how users maintain it as a tool for reliably, consistently conveying linguistic messages across time and geographic distance. The collective of users who maintain and transmit a mutually legible writing system can be referred to as a "script community."[34] A script community is by no means monolithic and may encompass groups that differ in how they produce or use writing, but its members maintain mutual comprehensibility by ensuring baseline regularity and transmission of their writing system through time and space.[35]

Indeed, one could argue, as I do here, that innovation of a writing system is necessarily an ongoing process that continues in some form for as long as the system remains in use. This feature becomes most apparent when a "poorly coalesced script community" leaves its writing system vulnerable to abandonment or dissolution.[36] On the Indian subcontinent, for instance, variants of the once unitary Brāhmī script gradually developed in different directions starting in the first millennium CE, initially into regional styles and ultimately into several dozen distinct writing systems.[37] Scribal communities in Greece during the eighth century BCE drew on Phoenician writing to develop distinct local alphabets, some of which persisted alongside each other for centuries.[38]

[33] Stephen Houston et al., "Last Writing: Script Obsolescence in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Mesoamerica," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 3 (2003): 432–35; see John Baines et al., eds., *The Disappearance of Writing Systems: Perspectives on Literacy and Communication* (Equinox Publishing, 2008).

[34] Stephen D. Houston, "The Small Deaths of Maya Writing," in Baines et al., *Disappearance*, 232–40; Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 22–23.

[35] Houston, "Archaeology of Communication Technologies," 237; see Bourdieu, "Economics," 645–47; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78–82; Michael Dietler and Ingrid Herbich, "Habitus, Techniques, Style: An Integrated Approach to the Social Understanding of Material Culture Boundaries," in *The Archaeology of Social Boundaries*, ed. Miriam T. Stark (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 248–60; William F. Hanks, "Discourse Genres in a Theory of Practice," *American Ethnologist* 14, no. 4 (1987): 668–92.

[36] Houston, "Archaeology of Communication Technologies," 239; compare Voogt, "Invention," 1–7.

[37] Richard G. Salomon, "South Asian Writing Systems: Brahmi and Kharoshti," in *The World's Writing Systems*, eds. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford University Press, 1996), 379, fig. 54.

[38] Robert Parker and Philippa M. Steele, "Introduction," in *The Early Greek Alphabets: Origin, Diffusion, Uses*, eds. Philippa M. Steele and Robert Parker (Oxford University Press, 2021), 16; Rudolf Wachter, "Zur Vorgeschichte des griechischen Alphabets," *Kadmos* 28, no. 1–2 (1989): 64–69.

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In ancient Egypt, the hieratic script written in the north (Demotic) diverged so far from its southern variant in the early first millennium BCE that the two "were no longer mutually legible" after just a few centuries.[39] Nothing inherent to writing as a technology guarantees a given script's coherence or mutual intelligibility, since it is constantly subject to change through ongoing use.

COMMUNICATIVE INNOVATION IN EARLY CIVILIZATIONS

In the four regions of the world where writing arose independently, scribes located the origins of their respective scripts in the sacred realm of the gods and ancestors, not in worldly concerns of administration or trade.[40] Myths in these cultures about other-than-human creators or propagators accounted for an emic understanding of writing's creation; they were also narratively convenient, in that they retroactively streamlined and ascribed intentionality to what was most likely an undirected process.[41] Importantly, too, they attest that early scribal traditions were keenly aware that the complex systems of graphic notation that scholars today call "writing" were bound up in the cultural phenomena now collectively known as "religion." As a technology, writing crossed the divide between the human and other-than-human realms. Even after a script's initial creation and coalescence as a system of graphic communication, ritual remained a key context for its use and transmission over many generations.

The cross-cultural comparisons made here and in subsequent chapters are not intended to contest the relevance of political centralization to coalescence of early writing systems. Processes related to the rise of the state were critical to development and transmission of Mesopotamian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Chinese characters, as many experts have argued. Smaller-scale, decentralized political and economic exchanges were important for the history of Maya hieroglyphs, too. Rather, I offer an alternative or corrective to assumptions about early writing with respect to the unparalleled centrality of politics and politics' presumed distinction from religion. In all four ancient civilizations, religion and ritual were closely embedded in governance; they

[39] Robert K. Ritner, "Egyptian Writing," in Daniels and Bright, *World's Writing Systems*, 81; see Ursula Verhoeven, "Stand und Aufgaben der Erforschung des Hieratischen und der Kursivhieroglyphen," in *Ägyptologische "Binsen"-Weisheiten I–II: Neue Forschungen und Methoden der Hieratistik*, ed. Ursula Verhoeven (Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015), figs. 13–14.

[40] Wayne M. Senner, "Theories and Myths on the Origins of Writing: An Historical Overview," in *The Origins of Writing*, ed. Wayne M. Senner (University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 10–13; see David B. Lurie, "Parables of Inscription: Some Notes on Narratives of the Origin of Writing," *History and Theory* 56 (2018): 32–49.

[41] Houston, "Archaeology of Communication Technologies," 239; see Lurie, "Parables," 38–43.

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were also crucial to maintaining coherent writing systems over centuries, well after their initial invention.[42]

Cuneiform in Mesopotamia

Writing in the sense of a systematic, graphic record of linguistic content did not appear in Mesopotamia until around 3300–3200 BCE, as attested by a trove of cuneiform documents recovered from middens and construction fill in the city of Uruk, in what is now southern Iraq.[43] Almost all of the oldest texts are either records about quantities or transfers of goods, or so-called lexical lists of names, occupations, or other nominal information.[44] Throughout its long history, cuneiform was an important tool for economic and administrative management. As such, it offers the best case study for the model that historically has exercised the greatest influence on cross-cultural theories of writing's creation and transmission in conjunction with the state, beginning with Ignace Gelb's seminal publication.[45]

Yet politics and economics were not divorced from religion or ritual, and the latter contexts shaped cuneiform's trajectory as well. Early Mesopotamian kingship depended on religion for divine justification of the ruler's authority; that connection, in turn, obligated the royal family to manage cult infrastructure and perform key rituals for the community.[46] That religion influenced cuneiform's development is apparent from many early examples of writing that concern temple provisioning and administration.[47] By the third millennium BCE, temple complexes were major foci of state-guided investment in architectural construction and craft production, activities which fueled demand for

[42] Compare Stephen Houston, "Mesoamerican Writing," in *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, eds. R. E. Asher and J. M. Y. Simpson (Pergamon Press, 1994), 2449.

[43] Robert K. Englund, "Texts from the Late Uruk Period," in *Mesopotamien: Späturuk-Zeit und frühdynastische Zeit*, eds. Pascal Attinger and Markus Wäfler (Universitätsverlag Freiburg, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1998), 18–41; Nissen, "Urbanization," 113–22; Christopher Woods, "The Earliest Mesopotamian Writing," in *Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond*, eds. Christopher Woods et al. (The Oriental Institute, 2015), 34.

[44] Hans J. Nissen, "The Archaic Texts from Uruk," *World Archaeology* 17, no. 3 (1986): 317–34; Hans J. Nissen et al., *Archaic Bookkeeping: Early Writing and Techniques of Economic Administration in the Ancient Near East*, trans. Paul Larsen (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 11–35.

[45] Gelb, *Study of Writing*, 221–22; Harald Haarmann, *Geschichte der Schrift*, 2nd ed. (C. H. Beck, 2004), 17–22; Law et al., "Writing and Record-Keeping," 212; compare Coulmas, *Writing and Society*, 22–23; Goody, *Interface*, 19, 23–31; Lydia H. Liu, "Scripts in Motion: Writing as Imperial Technology, Past and Present," *PMLA* 130, no. 2 (2015): 375–83; Postgate et al., "Evidence," 472–78.

[46] Mitchell S. Rothman, "Studying the Development of Complex Society: Mesopotamia in the Late Fifth and Fourth Millennia BC," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 12 (2004): 101–5.

[47] Nissen, "Archaic Texts," 318, 329–30; Anne Porter, *Mobile Pastoralism and the Formation of Near Eastern Civilizations: Weaving Together Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 149–53.

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luxury goods such as lapis lazuli, ivory, and gold.[48] To feed the gods as well as their own personnel, temples required foodstuffs supplied by a combination of their own production and contributions from the state or nearby communities under its purview.[49] Thousands of terse "economic texts" recovered from Uruk cite gods, their temples, and the priests who administered them, a clear testament that institutions and practitioners that we today would classify as "religious" were implicated in the recorded transactions.[50] Scholars no longer believe that temples exercised supreme control over the ancient Mesopotamian economy, but there is no doubt that these institutions were critical to coordinating and motivating much of the material exchange that cuneiform texts record.[51]

Cuneiform began to coalesce as a writing system in the late fifth millennium BCE, in tandem with major urbanization and development of complex exchange networks centered at Uruk.[52] The script's rapid spread, which occurred alongside dissemination of "material culture of religious practice" such as Uruk-style cylinder seals and beveled-rim ceramic bowls, was fueled by that city's status as a cultural, economic, and sociopolitical hub during the late fourth millennium BCE.[53] However, Mesopotamia did not experience large-scale political unification until the rise of the Akkadian empire in the twenty-fourth century BCE.[54] By then, scribes had adapted cuneiform to

[48] Nicholas Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* (Routledge, 1992), 114–16; see Barbara Nevling Porter, "Feeding Dinner to a Bed: Reflections on the Nature of Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia," *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 15 (2006): 307–31.

[49] Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 119–22; see Wilfred G. Lambert, "Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jan Quaegebeur (Uitgeverij Peeters en Departement Oriëntalistiek, 1993); Stefan M. Maul, "Den Gott ernähren: Überlegungen zum regelmäßigen Opfer in altorientalischen Tempeln," in *Transformations in Sacrificial Practices: From Antiquity to Modern Times*, eds. Eftychia Stavrianopoulou et al. (Lit-Verlag, 2008).

[50] Nissen, "Archaic Texts," fig. 6, pl. 4.

[51] Michael Kozuh, "Temple, Economy, and Religion in First Millennium Babylonia," *Religion Compass* 2, no. 6 (2008): 929–48; Norman Yoffee, "Political Economy in Early Mesopotamian States," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 281–311.

[52] Guillermo Algaze, *The Uruk World System: The Dynamics of Expansion of Early Mesopotamian Civilization* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 117–19; Nissen, "Urbanization," 118; Eleanor Robson, "Literacy, Numeracy and the State in Early Mesopotamia," in *Literacy and the State in the Ancient Mediterranean*, eds. Kathryn Lomas et al. (Accordia Research Institute, 2007).

[53] Porter, *Mobile Pastoralism*, 130; see Algaze, *Uruk World System*, 23–84; Geoff Emberling, "Political Control in an Early State: The Eye Temple and the Uruk Expansion in Northern Mesopotamia," in *Of Pots and Plans: Papers on the Archaeology and History of Mesopotamia and Syria Presented to David Oates in Honour of His 75th Birthday*, eds. Lamia al-Gailani Werr et al. (Nabu Publications, 2002).

[54] Benjamin R. Foster, *The Age of Agade: Inventing Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Routledge, 2016), 1–25; Piotr Steinkeller, "Early Political Development in Mesopotamia and the Origins of the Sargonic Empire," in *Akkad, the First World Empire: Structure, Ideology, Traditions*, ed. Mario Liverani (Sargon, 1993).

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record the Akkadian language alongside Sumerian, which survived among elites and administrative officials but was no longer widely spoken among the general population.[55] Akkadian and cuneiform persisted as the region's primary language and script, respectively, under the Babylonian empire, which gained control of southern Mesopotamia in the early second millennium BCE,[56] and under the Assyrian empire, which rose to prominence in northern Mesopotamia in the late second millennium.[57] Texts on ritual, mythology, divination, and other religious themes account for major portions of the cuneiform corpora produced under Assyrian as well as Babylonian rule. Their contents reflect a mix of cultural knowledge inherited from Sumerian tradition and more recent ideas, including some developed through interaction between the imperial contemporaries.[58]

Cuneiform remained the predominant writing system through the Neo-Assyrian empire's brief control of southern Mesopotamia in the eighth century BCE, the resurgence of the Neo-Babylonian empire in 626, and the invasion of the Achaemenid empire in 539.[59] Throughout this era, religious practitioners and spaces played key roles in maintaining the writing system long after it had disappeared from other spheres of social, political, and cultural life.[60] Through the late first century CE, however, use of the script continued to wither in favor of alphabetic writing.[61] In a strange twist of fate, the last known cuneiform text, an almanac from 79 or 80 CE, also originates from Uruk,

[55] Jerrold S. Cooper, "Sumerian and Akkadian in Sumer and Akkad," *Orientalia* 42 (1973): 239–46; Foster, *Age of Agade*, 206–14; Michael P. Streck, "Akkadian and Cuneiform," in *History of the Akkadian Language*, ed. Juan-Pablo Vita Barra (Brill, 2021).

[56] Dominique Charpin, *Writing, Law, and Kingship in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 7–42; Eleanor Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks: A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-Millennium Assyria and Babylonia* (University College London Press, 2019), 149–245.

[57] Stefan Jakob, "Middle Assyrian," in Vita Barra, *History*; Nicholas Postgate, *Bronze Age Bureaucracy: Writing and the Practice of Government in Assyria* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 47–85.

[58] Jakob, "Middle Assyrian," 1144–55; Steve Tinney, "Tablets of Schools and Scholars: A Portrait of the Old Babylonian Corpus," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, eds. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford University Press, 2011), 584–93.

[59] David Brown, "Increasingly Redundant: The Growing Obsolescence of the Cuneiform Script in Babylonia from 539 BC," in Baines et al., *Disappearance*, 73–74, table 4.1; Philippe Clancier, "Cuneiform Culture's Last Guardians: The Old Urban Notability of Hellenistic Uruk," in Radner and Robson, *Oxford Handbook*.

[60] Brown, "Increasingly Redundant," 74–76, 84–92; Aage Westenholz, "The Graeco-Babyloniaca Once Again," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie* 97, no. 2 (2007): 294–308; see Lucinda Dirven, "Religious Continuity and Change in Parthian Mesopotamia: A Note on the Survival of Babylonian Traditions," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 1, no. 2 (2014): 201–29.

[61] Brown, "Increasingly Redundant," 76–82; see Michael P. Streck, "Keilschrift und Alphabet," in *Hieroglyphen, Alphabete, Schriftreformen: Studien zu Multiliteralismus, Schriftwechsel und Orthographieneuregelungen*, eds. Dörte Borcherset al. (Seminar für Ägyptologie und Koptologie, 2001).

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which by that time had come under control of the Parthian Empire.[62] That cuneiform remained a vibrant, coherent writing system in Mesopotamia over the course of three millennia is a testament to the region's robust networks of intellectual exchange, which facilitated scribal communication across linguistic communities and a half-dozen changes in imperial regime.[63]

Hieroglyphs in Egypt

Hieroglyphic writing is attested in ancient Egypt no later than 3320–3200 BCE, almost contemporaneously with proto-cuneiform in Uruk.[64] From the script's beginnings, hieroglyphs appear in both "cultic" and "administrative-economic" contexts, thwarting any attempt to isolate one sphere as their locus of origin.[65] Approximately 200 ivory, bone, or stone tags recovered in Tomb U-j at Abydos, which date to the thirty-third or thirty-second century BCE and are the oldest known Egyptian inscriptions, may have held "ceremonial" value in addition to an administrative purpose, given how labor-intensive their production would have been.[66] Generally, however, the early Egyptian corpus is biased toward funerary contexts, particularly the dry cemeteries of wealthy individuals buried at some remove from the Nile River Delta.[67] Other texts from this initial stage were likely inked on papyrus, wood, and other perishable artifacts that simply have not survived.[68]

In fact, the Egyptian script's graphic origins likely lie in the representational culture of early temples, where kings combined ritual performance with visual symbolism to reinforce their connection with the gods.[69] Chronology suggests

[62] Hermann Hunger and Teije de Jong, "Almanac W22340a from Uruk: The Latest Datable Cuneiform Tablet," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie* 104, no. 2 (2014): 182–94.

[63] Karen Radner, "An Imperial Communication Network the State Correspondence of the Neo-Assyrian Empire," in *State Correspondence in the Ancient World: From New Kingdom Egypt to the Roman Empire*, ed. (Oxford University Press, 2014); Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 253–70.

[64] John Baines, "The Earliest Egyptian Writing: Development, Context, Purpose," in Houston, *First Writing*, 153–54; Michael Dee et al., "An Absolute Chronology for Early Egypt Using Radiocarbon Dating and Bayesian Statistical Modelling," *Proceedings of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 469, no. 2159 (2013): 20130395.

[65] Adelheid Schlott, *Schrift und Schreiber im alten Ägypten* (C. H. Beck, 1989), 104.

[66] Andréas Stauder, "The Earliest Egyptian Writing," in Woods et al., *Visible Language*, 143.

[67] Kathryn A. Bard, "The Emergence of the Egyptian State (c. 3200–2686 BC)," in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (Oxford University Press, 2000), 66–73, 76.

[68] Baines, "Earliest Egyptian Writing," 169–71; Günter Dreyer et al., *Umm El-Qaab I: Das prädynastische Königsgrab U-j und seine frühen Schriftzeugnisse* (Philipp von Zabern, 1998), 145; Jochem Kahl, "Die frühen Schriftzeugnisse aus dem Grab U-j in Umm El-Qaab," *Chronique d'Égypte* 78 (2003): 134.

[69] John Baines, "Communication and Display: The Integration of Early Egyptian Art and Writing," *Antiquity* 63, no. 240 (1989): 471–82; Bard, "Emergence," 76–78; Stauder, "Earliest," 142–44.

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that hieroglyphic writing and its cursive form, hieratic, developed during the late fourth and early third millennia BCE in tandem with the political institution of the king and, later, the "pharaonic state."[70] Epigraphic and archaeological evidence indicates that the ascendant state and particularly its desire for monumental representation of pharaonic ideology provided "the ultimate stimulus to this surge of creativity" that birthed hieroglyphic writing in Egypt.[71] This proposal is supported by the funerary context of the earliest texts from Abydos, an early seat of dynastic power, and by the bureaucratic and economic orientation of other texts from the same period.[72]

Writing in ancient Egypt thus crystallized in close articulation with the rise of the state, its administrative concerns, and the centralized governance that the pharaonic order both demanded and supported. At the same time, Egyptian dynastic rule was a religious institution from its beginnings. The king was considered a divine being and "the crucial lynchpin that held together not only Upper and Lower Egypt, but also the disparate worlds of gods and men."[73] In conjunction with royal iconography, hieroglyphs offered a medium to graphically link dynasts' administrative and religious roles; in the words of John Baines, "[r]ule was ritual and representation fused the two in recording them."[74] Throughout its history, the script retained ritual connotations and uses that are not easily disentangled from political concerns.[75]

The hieroglyphs were a key medium for recording and transmitting ritual practices and religious ideas through time and space between the living, the dead, and the gods. Religion also shaped written form in pharaonic Egypt, in addition to informing writing's function. By the start of the Middle Kingdom in the mid-twentieth century BCE, scribes had developed a linear cursive hand that they deployed specifically for texts with religious or magical, including

[70] John Baines, "Aesthetic Culture and the Emergence of Writing in Egypt During Naqada IIIpar," *Archéo-Nil* 20 (2010): 134–49; Juan Carlos Moreno García, "Building the Pharaonic State: Territory, Elite, and Power in Ancient Egypt in the 3rd Millennium BCE," in *Experiencing Power, Generating Authority: Cosmos, Politics, and the Ideology of Kingship in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia*, eds. Jane A. Hill et al. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

[71] Baines, "Communication," 480; see Bard, "Emergence"; Kathryn A. Bard, "Political Economies of Predynastic Egypt and the Formation of the Early State," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 25, no. 1 (2017): 1–36; Jack A. Josephson and Günter Dreyer, "Naqada IId: The Birth of an Empire Kingship, Writing, Organized Religion," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 51 (2015): 165–78.

[72] Bard, "Emergence," 64; Elise V. MacArthur, "The Conception and Development of the Egyptian Writing System," in Woods et al., *Visible Language*, 119.

[73] Ellen F. Morris, "Propaganda and Performance at the Dawn of the State," in Hill et al., *Experiencing Power*, 33.

[74] Baines, "Communication," 479.

[75] Jochem Kahl, "Zur Problematik der sogenannten Steuervermerke im Ägypten der 0.–1. Dynastie," in *Divitiae Aegypti: Koptologische und verwandte Studien zu Ehren von Martin Krause*, eds. Cäcilia Flucket al. (L. Reichert, 1995), 171–73; Stauder, "Earliest," 142–46.

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funerary, contents.[76] According to New Kingdom (c. 1550–1070 BCE) mythology, language was an important instrument in the creation of the world and its inhabitants, including the gods, who originated from "a speech act, an act of verbal articulation."[77] The gods, in turn, created the hieroglyphs based on knowledge "formed in the heart" and "communicated by the tongue."[78] Hieroglyphic writing was itself godly speech, not a mere visual representation thereof.[79]

Similarly, hieroglyphic writing was central to managing the burgeoning Egyptian state and the dynasty as a social institution. Inscriptions on seal stamps and pottery indicate that, by the mid-third millennium BCE, the state had established a sophisticated network that administered settlements throughout Upper Egypt via local elites who were guided by, if not subject to, the king.[80] Writing facilitated not only documentation of economic, political, and religious concern but also more general communication across the social and geographic distances that such organization entailed.[81] The hieroglyphs additionally supported other forms of visual presentation. From writing's initial stages, "royal commemorative art" was a principal context of use, where text complemented images with information about kings, the dynastic institution, and their legitimate authority.[82] Over time, (semi-)public display of hieroglyphs in ideological support of the state recursively strengthened the signs' conceptual and formal entanglement with pictorial representation that they would retain throughout their history of use, in contrast to hieratic and the later demotic scripts.[83]

Logographs in China

Of the four autochthonous inventions of writing in human history, the Chinese tradition is unique in maintaining an unbroken lineage of script use into the present. Characters directly derived from ancient Chinese writing remain in active use today among more than a billion people in East and

[76] Mohamed Sherif Ali, "Die Kursivhieroglyphen: Eine paläographische Betrachtung," *Göttinger Miszellen: Beiträge zur ägyptologischen Diskussion* 180 (2001): 9–21; Jorge Lardé, "Cursive Hieroglyphs in the Book of the Dead," in *The Oxford Handbook of Egyptian Epigraphy and Paleography*, eds. Vanessa Davies and Dimitri Laboury (Oxford University Press, 2020).

[77] Jan Assmann, "Creation through Hieroglyphs: The Cosmic Grammatology of Ancient Egypt," in *The Poetics of Grammar and the Metaphysics of Sound and Sign*, eds. Sergio La Porta and David Shulman (Brill, 2007), 24.

[78] Assmann, "Creation," 26. [79] Assmann, "Creation," 27.

[80] Moreno García, "Building," 190–95. [81] Bard, "Political Economies."

[82] Bard, "Emergence," 75–76; see Pascal Vernus, "La naissance de l'écriture dans l'Égypte pharaonique: Une problématique revisitée," *Archéo-Nil* 26 (2016): 105–34.

[83] Baines, *Visual and Written Culture*, 281–97; Houston et al., "Last Writing," 439–42.

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Southeast Asia, including readers and writers of Japanese (*kanji*) and Korean (*hanja*). Unlike modern descendant scripts that often include purely phonetic elements – including contemporary Chinese characters, which are functionally morphographic[84] – the earliest writing in China was strictly logographic; that is, each character recorded a phonetic form and a corresponding semantic value, albeit in some cases with support from an accompanying phonetic determinative.[85]

Writing in China was closely associated with ritual practice from its first appearance. Written signs are attested as early as the middle of the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE) on a jade pendant, as well as on a bone fragment dating to the Huanbei period (1350–1250).[86] The first substantial corpora originate from the Yinxu II period (1200–1050) and include divinatory texts recorded on (primarily bovine) scapulae and turtle plastrons, plus bronze inscriptions with brief accounts of the artifact's maker or recipient.[87] The small scale and specialized, ritually oriented contents of early inscriptions indicate that they were intended for a limited, likely elite audience.[88] Yet the oldest extant oracle bone texts preserve a script that was already "fully developed and versatile," indicating that writing's origins were surely earlier and probably rooted in Late Neolithic (3000–2300 BCE) symbolic systems.[89]

The dearth of early Chinese administrative or accounting texts is misleading and likely reflects more preservation bias than historical absence.[90] As in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, however, there was no clear distinction between religion and governance in ancient China. A viable ritual basis for

[84] Henry Rogers, *Writing Systems: A Linguistic Approach* (Blackwell, 2005), 14; see Zev Handel, "Logography and the Classification of Writing Systems: A Response to Unger," *SCRIPTA* 7 (2015): 109–50; Koongliang Huang et al., "Neural Strategies for Reading Japanese and Chinese Sentences: A Cross-Linguistic fMRI Study of Character-Decoding and Morphosyntax," *Neuropsychologia* 50, no. 11 (2012): 2598–604.

[85] William G. Boltz, "The Invention of Writing in China," *Oriens Extremus* 42 (2000): 6–7; David N. Keightley, "Art, Ancestors, and the Origins of Writing in China," *Representations*, no. 56 (1996): 70; see Françoise Bottéro, "Writing on Shell and Bone in Shang China," in Houston, *First Writing*; Shengyu Zhu, "A New Perspective and Method for Understanding the Relationship between Characters and Words in the Shang Dynasty," *Journal of Chinese Writing Systems* 4, no. 2 (2020): 135–46.

[86] Wang, "Writing," 134–36.

[87] William G. Boltz, "Literacy and the Emergence of Writing in China," in *Writing and Literacy in Early China: Studies from the Columbia Early China Seminar*, eds. Li Feng and David Prager Branner (University of Washington Press, 2012), 65.

[88] Boltz, "Literacy," 67; Law et al., "Writing and Record-Keeping," 216.

[89] William G. Boltz, "Early Chinese Writing," *World Archaeology* 17, no. 3 (1986): 429; see Paola Demattè, "The Origins of Chinese Writing: The Neolithic Evidence," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 20, no. 2 (2010): 211–28; Demattè, *Origins*, 149–224; Xueqin Li et al., "The Earliest Writing? Sign Use in the Seventh Millennium BC at Jiahu, Henan Province, China," *Antiquity* 77, no. 295 (2003): 31–44.

[90] Robert W. Bagley, "Anyang Writing and the Origin of the Chinese Writing System," in Houston, *First Writing*, 217–26; Demattè, *Origins*, 357–63.

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sustaining political authority is already legible in texts from the Shang dynasty and was further elaborated over time.[91] Gradual changes in the cultural legitimation of political power are evident in some Shang oracle bone texts that almost invert the dynastic hierarchy by expressing "authorization from above," in the form of permission from the king for subordinates to execute a particular task, as opposed to writing used to convey information "from the subordinate to the superior."[92] Thus, the Shang king negotiated his own place in the hierarchy and justified his authority over the living by interacting with ancestors on behalf of the dynasty and his subjects. At the same time, the script's role in mediating relations with the ancestors may have encouraged its functional expansion to the realm of "historical writing," or record-keeping about people and events of the past.[93]

Writing's legitimating power under the Shang and Zhou (1046–256 BCE) dynasties derived primarily from divinatory engagement with ancestors and other spirits. Zhou kings continued their predecessors' practice of ancestral worship while expanding the dynastic repertoire to "non-devotional ritual" that more explicitly invoked the state's authority over the contemporary population.[94] Beginning in the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), the Chinese state coopted writing for a burgeoning bureaucratic apparatus by channeling its communicative authority toward population administration.[95] As a result, during the late first millennium BCE, writing essentially "bureaucratized ... communication between the living and the spirits" by integrating into dynastic administration the dual forms of "*reporting in writing*" to both superiors and subordinates.[96]

Political hierarchy during the Shang and Zhou dynasties centered on kin-based relations that transcended the mortal and spiritual realms; from the Warring States period onward, however, political status was calibrated according to "claims of expertise" about the natural and political world.[97] In the new office- or rank-based hierarchy, a king's authority derived from his capacity to order the natural world, rather than from the privilege of communing with the ancestors and maintaining the spiritual order – a conceptual shift fueled by "the power of writing to generate parallel realms that provided a

[91] David N. Keightley, "The Religious Commitment: Shang Theology and the Genesis of Chinese Political Culture," *History of Religions* 17, no. 3/4 (1978): 211–25.
[92] Law et al. 2015, "Writing and Record-Keeping," 215.
[93] Stephen W. Durrant, "The Task and Ritual of Historical Writing in Ancient China," in *Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 23.
[94] Paul Nicholas Vogt, *Kingship, Ritual, and Royal Ideology in Western Zhou China* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 80.
[95] Dematté, *Origins*, 363–66; Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, 13–51; see Wang, "Administrative Reach."
[96] Wang, "Writing," 154 (emphasis original). [97] Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, 51.

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model for human affairs."[98] Over one thousand years after writing first appeared in ancient China, though, religious concerns remained crucial to governance and vice versa. Through the Warring States period into the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) and beyond, writing continued to flourish and evolve in its role as a medium for communication among people, gods, and ancestors.

Writing in Mesoamerica

Classic Maya hieroglyphs were the most complex and versatile system of graphic notation developed in the Americas. Yet the writing system was neither the first nor the only one innovated in Mesoamerica. All of the more than one dozen writing systems native to the region were closely tied to imagery and most likely developed from or at least in tandem with iconographic canons.[99] Unfortunately, all scripts that predated or were contemporaneous with Maya hieroglyphs remain undeciphered due to a combination of a paucity of known texts, limited sign inventories, and uncertainty about the local population's linguistic identity.[100] Nonetheless, the diversity of systems of graphic notation that developed among multiple, linguistically diverse civilizations clearly attests to the cultural and technological value that Indigenous Mesoamericans ascribed to writing. Furthermore, the form, graphic contents, and archaeological context of Mesoamerican inscriptions suggest that many characteristics of Maya writing – including the prominence of calendrics, intimate ties to imagery, and integration into elite ritual practice and divine kinship – were inherited or adopted from other regional traditions.

Although the identity of some early scripts is unclear, scholars of ancient Mesoamerica generally recognize Cotzumalhuapan, Epiclassic, Gulf (El Tajín), Isthmian, Izapan, Maya, Mixtec, Mixteca-Puebla, Nahuatl (Aztec), Ñuiñe, Olmec, Teotihuacan, Toltec, and Zapotec as distinct writing systems that were autochthonous to the region.[101] First evidence of writing appears by the tenth century BCE in association with the Olmec civilization, which inhabited areas along the Gulf Coast in the present-day Mexican states of Tabasco and

[98] Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, 51.

[99] Justeson, "Origin"; Justeson and Mathews, "Evolutionary Trends"; Prem, "Calendrics and Writing."

[100] Michael D. Coe, "On *Not* Breaking the Indus Code," *Antiquity* 69, no. 263 (1995): 393–95; Houston, "Writing in Early Mesoamerica"; John Justeson, "Early Mesoamerican Writing Systems," in Nichols and Pool, *Oxford Handbook*.

[101] Coe, "Early Steps," 110, fig. 1; Christophe Helmke and Mikkel Bøg Clemmensen, "A Few Words on the Copenhagen Roundtable and its Proceedings," in *Western Mesoamerican Calendars and Writing Systems*, eds. Mikkel Bøg Clemmensen and Christophe Helmke (Archaeopress, 2023), v; Houston, "Writing in Early Mesoamerica"; Justeson, "Origin."

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Veracruz.[102] Historical linguistic research indicates that the Olmec likely spoke an ancestral Mixe-Zoquean language, but their undeciphered inscriptions cannot offer any confirmation of this proposal.[103] The signs carved into an unprovenanced Preclassic artifact known as the Cascajal block, which was recovered during construction work in the Mexican state of Veracruz and made known to archaeologists in 1999, may represent either the Olmec script known from other artifacts or another, related writing system.[104]

The so-called Isthmian or "Epi-Olmec" script developed out of the Olmec tradition and generated a small corpus of texts on artifacts that date between 36 BCE and the early to mid-first millennium CE.[105] Of all writing systems native to Mesoamerica, Isthmian is most clearly related to Classic Maya hieroglyphs. It was also used contemporaneously with early Maya writing, albeit for a much shorter time span and in a more restricted geographic region. Like other Mesoamerican writing systems, the Maya and Isthmian scripts use a combination of dots and rectangular bars to represent numerals, with each dot representing one and each bar equaling five.[106] They also share a practice of recording place notational Long Count dates and arranging texts in double-column format, features that distinguish both traditions from other Mesoamerican writing systems.[107] Still, many details of the Isthmian script's history remain unknown, including the language that it encoded.[108]

[102] Justeson and Mathews, "Evolutionary Trends"; Mary E. D. Pohl et al., "Olmec Origins of Mesoamerican Writing," *Science* 298, no. 5600 (2002): 1984–87; María del Carmen Rodríguez Martínez et al., "Oldest Writing in the New World," *Science* 313 (2006): 1610–14.

[103] Lyle Campbell and Terrence Kaufman, "A Linguistic Look at the Olmecs," *American Antiquity* 41 (1976): 80–89; Justeson, "Early Mesoamerican Writing Systems"; Søren Wichmann et al., "Posibles correlaciones lingüísticas y arqueológicas vinculadas con los Olmecas," in *Olmeca: Balance y perspectivas*, eds. María Teresa Uriarte and Rebecca B. González Lauck (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 2008).

[104] Stephen D. Houston, "The Case for Olmec Writing," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Olmecs*, eds. Christopher A. Pool and Carl J. Wendt (Oxford University Press, 2025); David F. Mora-Marín, "The Cascajal Block: New Line Drawing, Distributional Analysis, and Orthographic Patterns," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 31, no. 2 (2020): 210–29; Rodríguez Martínez et al., "Oldest Writing."

[105] Houston, "Writing in Early Mesoamerica," 296–97; see Stephen D. Houston and Michael D. Coe, "Has Isthmian Writing Been Deciphered?" *Mexicon* 25, no. 6 (2003): 151–61; John Justeson and Terrence Kaufman, "A Decipherment of Epi-Olmec Hieroglyphic Writing," *Science* 259, no. 5102 (1993): 1703–11; George Stuart, "The Carved Stela from La Mojarra, Veracruz, Mexico," *Science* 259, no. 5102 (1993): 1700–1.

[106] Coe, "Early Steps," 110; John S. Justeson et al., *The Foreign Impact on Lowland Mayan Language and Script* (Tulane University, 1985), 31, 32.

[107] Coe, "Early Steps," 112–20; Houston, "Writing in Early Mesoamerica," 280; Justeson, "Origin," 453.

[108] Houston and Coe, "Has Isthmian Writing Been Deciphered?"; Mora-Marín, "Cascajal Block."

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Izapa and Cotzumalhuapa on the Pacific piedmont of modern-day Chiapas and Guatemala, respectively, also hosted undeciphered scripts with clear ties to Classic Maya hieroglyphs, although their textual corpora and sign inventories are even more restricted than those of Isthmian.[109] Other writing systems that emerged from the Olmec tradition, in contrast, seem to have developed on a trajectory separate from Isthmian and Maya hieroglyphic writing.[110] Perhaps the most robustly attested is the Zapotec writing system, which originated in what is now the Mexican state of Oaxaca. Its history stretches from the fifth century BCE into the ninth century CE, although most extant inscriptions date no later than the sixth century.[111] The extant corpus is comparatively large, yet the texts are short and collectively feature only a few hundred signs.[112] However, the Zapotec script provided the basis for a semasiographic system later used in the nearby Mixteca lowlands and highlands.[113] The several hundred surviving texts from the Mixtec tradition are diverse in form and content and span over one-and-a-half millennia, from approximately the first century CE and through several generations of Spanish colonialism.[114]

The Zapotec script also bears some resemblance to the writing system used in the great central Mexican urban center of Teotihuacan between roughly 100–600 CE, although it is unclear whether these similarities resulted from contact or descent from a common ancestral tradition.[115] The script at Teotihuacan is the latest addition to the Mesoamerican roster of native writing

[109] Justeson and Mathews, "Evolutionary Trends," 114–16; see Oswaldo F. Chinchilla Mazariegos, *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Volume 10: Part 1: Cotzumalhuapa* (Peabody Museum, 2018); David F. Mora-Marín, "Izapan Writing: Classification and Preliminary Observations," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 29, no. 1 (2018): 93–112; Stephanie M. Strauss, "Negotiating Narrative Domains: Izapa's Place in the Discourse on Early Hieroglyphic Writing," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 29, no. 2 (2018): 347–59.

[110] Coe, "Early Steps," fig. 1; Justeson, "Origin," 447; Justeson and Mathews, "Evolutionary Trends," 106–16; Joyce Marcus, "The Origins of Mesoamerican Writing," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976): 44.

[111] Javier Urcid, *Zapotec Hieroglyphic Writing* (Dumbarton Oaks, 2001), 23; see Joyce Marcus, "Zapotec Writing," *Scientific American* 242, no. 2 (1980): 50–64; Gordon Whittaker, "The Zapotec Writing System," in *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians, Vol. 5: Epigraphy*, ed. Victoria R. Bricker (University of Texas Press, 1992), 5–6.

[112] Nicholas P. Carter, "Epigraphy and Empire: Reassessing Textual Evidence for Formative Zapotec Imperialism," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 27, no. 3 (2017): 433–50; Urcid, *Zapotec Hieroglyphic Writing*, 1–5.

[113] Justeson and Mathews, "Evolutionary Trends," 107; Urcid, *Zapotec Hieroglyphic Writing*, 1–4.

[114] Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, "Mixtec Cultural Vocabulary"; see Maarten E. R. G. N. Jansen and Laura van Broekhoven, eds., *Mixtec Writing and Society: Escritura de Ñuu Dzahui* (Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 2008).

[115] Karl A. Taube, "Teotihuacan and the Development of Writing in Early Classic Central Mexico," in Boone and Urton, *Their Way*; Urcid, "Scribal Traditions," 855–56.

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systems, as its glottographic nature has only been recently recognized.[116] There is no local evidence for precursor notational systems, and the local population's linguistic affiliation remains uncertain.[117] Teotihuacan's status as a major metropolis also meant that its residents were exposed to and may have even produced texts in other contemporaneous writing systems, including Maya hieroglyphs, example of which have been found in the apartment complex of Tetitla.[118]

The Teotihuacan system is clearly a forebearer of the hieroglyphs used in central Mexico under the Aztec empire (1428–1521 CE), which persisted for several generations following European contact.[119] The Aztec hieroglyphs were also the most probable source for the writing system used among the Postclassic (925–1517) Kaqchikel, K'iche', and other Maya groups in the western coast and highlands of Guatemala and Chiapas, all of whom had close ties to central Mexico.[120] In contrast, the short, largely undeciphered texts of Preclassic Kaminaljuyu', in what is now Guatemala City, and Tak'alik Ab'aj on Guatemala's Pacific coast may represent early iterations of the same notational

[116] Colas, "Writing in Space," 16–23; Christophe Helmke and Jesper Nielsen, "If Mountains Could Speak: Ancient Toponyms Recorded at Teotihuacan, Mexico," *Contributions in New World Archaeology* 10 (2014): 73–112; James C. Langley, *Symbolic Notation of Teotihuacan: Elements of Writing in a Mesoamerican Culture of the Classic Period* (British Archaeological Reports, 1986), 97–171; Karl Taube, *The Writing System of Ancient Teotihuacan* (Center for Ancient American Studies, 2000), 15–47.

[117] Colas, "Writing in Space"; Davide Domenici, "The Writing System of Teotihuacan: An Overview," in Clemmensen and Helmke, *Western Mesoamerican Calendars and Writing Systems*; Magnus Pharao Hansen and Christophe Helmke, "The Language of Teotihuacan Writing," *Current Anthropology* 66, no. 5 (2025), 705–39.

[118] Clara Millon, "Painting, Writing, and Polity at Teotihuacan, Mexico," *American Antiquity* 38, no. 3 (1973): 298–99; Jesper Nielsen and Christophe G. B. Helmke, "The Writing on the Wall: A Paleographic Analysis of the Maya Texts of Tetitla, Teotihuacan," in *The Maya in a Mesoamerican Context: Comparative Approaches to Maya Studies*, eds. Jesper Nielsen and Christophe G. B. Helmke (Anton Saurwein, 2013), 144–46; Karl A. Taube, "Tetitla and the Maya Presence at Teotihuacan," in *The Maya and Teotihuacan: Reinterpreting Early Classic Interaction*, ed. Geoffrey Braswell (University of Texas Press, 2003), 285–87.

[119] Helmke and Nielsen, "If Mountains Could Speak," 83, 102; Urcid, "Scribal Traditions," 858–59; see Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (University of Texas Press, 2000); George L. Cowgill, "Teotihuacan Glyphs and Imagery in the Light of Some Early Colonial Texts," in *Art, Ideology, and the City of Teotihuacan*, ed. Janet Catherine Berlo (Dumbarton Oaks, 1992), 231–46; Alfonso Lacadena García-Gallo, "New Research on the Aztec Script: A True Writing System," in *Tiempo detenido, tiempo suficiente: Ensayos y narraciones mesoamericanistas en homenaje a Alfonso Lacadena García-Gallo*, eds. Harri Kettunen et al. (European Association of Mayanists WAYEB, 2019); Marc Zender, "One Hundred and Fifty Years of Nahuatl Decipherment," *The PARI Journal* 8 (2008): 24–37.

[120] George F. Guillemín, "The Ancient Cakchiquel Capital of Iximché," *Expedition* 9 (1967): 29; Robert M. Hill II, "Pictograph to Alphabet – and Back: Reconstructing the Pictographic Origins of the Xajil Chronicle," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 102, no. 4 (2012): 1–31; Judith M. Maxwell, "Change in Literacy and Literature in Highland Guatemala, Precontact to Present," *Ethnohistory* 62, no. 3 (2015): 554–72.

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tradition to which later Classic Maya writing and iconography belonged, or one or more related but distinct script tradition(s).[121] In any case, the Maya highlands went epigraphically silent during the Classic period. When writing was reintroduced there during the Postclassic period, it seems to have taken the form of a central Mexican-derived system.[122] The limited examples of Classic Maya hieroglyphs in the region, in contrast, originate from the eastern and northern areas abutting the central and southern lowlands.[123]

Classic Maya Hieroglyphs

The lowlands of what are now southern Mexico and northern Central America were the heartland of Maya hieroglyphic production throughout the script's long history. The earliest known texts date to the Late Preclassic period (400 BCE–200 CE) and seem to have been concentrated in the central lowlands, although many examples are unprovenanced.[124] These early inscriptions are few and far between, and many are short or all but unreadable. But they clearly document an already well-developed writing system. As such, the hieroglyphs most likely developed even earlier and emerged from other Mesoamerican traditions with which Maya hieroglyphs demonstrate graphic and structural affinities, especially Isthmian writing.[125]

Although a sizable corpus of texts survives from the Early Classic period (250–600 CE), the clear majority of surviving Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions date to the Late Classic (600–820) period and were produced in the central and

[121] Alfonso Lacadena, "Escritura y lengua en Tak'alik Ab'aj: Problemas y propuestas," in *XXIII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 2009*, eds. Bárbara Arroyo et al. (Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, 2010), 1024–29; David F. Mora-Marín, "Kaminaljuyu Stela 10: Script Classification and Linguistic Affiliation," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 16, no. 1 (2005): 63–87; David F. Mora-Marín, "Análisis epigráfico y lingüístico de la escritura Maya del periodo Preclásico Tardío: Implicaciones para la historia sociolingüística de la región," in *XXI Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 2007*, eds. Juan P. Laporte et al. (Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, 2008), 1062–75; Lee A. Parsons, *The Origins of Maya Art: Monumental Stone Sculpture of Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, and the Southern Pacific Coast* (Dumbarton Oaks, 1986), 45–81.

[122] Guillemín, "Ancient Cakchiquel Capital," 29.

[123] Mallory E. Matsumoto, "Estela" Erin L. Sears et al., "A Story of Awe and Clay: Mold-Made Hieroglyphs from Alta Verapaz, Guatemala," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 33, no. 3 (2021): 417–31; Brent K. S. Woodfill et al., "Changing Patterns of Ritual Activity in an Unlooted Cave in Central Guatemala," *Latin American Antiquity* 23, no. 1 (2012): 93–119.

[124] Milan Kováč et al., "The Legacy of an Early Maya King: Text, Imagery and Ritual Contexts of a Late Preclassic Cache from Structure H-XVI Sub, Uaxactun," *Mexicon* 38, no. 1 (2016): 9–29; Stuart et al., "Early Maya Calendar Record"; see Mora-Marín, *Late Preclassic Inscription*.

[125] Coe, "Early Steps"; Houston, "Writing in Early Mesoamerica," 298–308; Justeson, "Early Mesoamerican Writing Systems."

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southern lowlands.[126] The Terminal Classic era (820–925) saw a significant reduction in production of monumental hieroglyphs in both quantity and distribution, after which the script's sphere of active use became largely restricted to the northern Yucatan Peninsula, which remained the epicenter of hieroglyphic production through the Postclassic period.[127] With the imposition of Spanish colonialism beginning in the sixteenth century, use of Maya writing declined rapidly before ceasing in most places. There are no surviving colonial-era hieroglyphic codices from the Yucatan, and persistence of scribal activity during that period is known mostly from secondary traces.[128] The last vestiges of hieroglyphic writing dissipated by the late seventeenth century.[129] Now, however, the previously defunct writing system is being revitalized among Indigenous stakeholders in Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, and Honduras as a marker of Pan-Maya ethnolinguistic and cultural identity.[130]

Typologically, the Maya hieroglyphic script is distinct from other Mesoamerican writing systems by virtue of its robust capacity for phonetic representation. Excepting a few signs that may be considered semantic determinatives or classifiers,[131] all known hieroglyphs can be classified as either logographs, which denote associated phonetic and semantic values, or syllables representing a consonant-vowel sequence with no associated meaning. A minority of hieroglyphs are polyvalent and may fulfill either a logographic or a syllabic function, depending on context.[132] Although logographs convey

[126] Nikolai Grube, *Die Entwicklung der Mayaschrift: Grundlagen zur Erforschung des Wandels der Mayaschrift von der Protoklassik bis zur spanischen Eroberung* (Karl-Friedrich von Flemming, 1990), 38–41, table 1.

[127] Daniel Graña-Behrens, "Die Maya-Inschriften aus Nordwestyukatan, Mexiko" (PhD dissertation, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhems-Universität Bonn, 2002), 238–67; Houston, "Small Deaths"; Martin and Grube, *Chronicles*, 226–28.

[128] John F. Chuchiak IV, "The Images Speak: The Survival and Production of Hieroglyphic Codices and Their Use in Post-Conquest Maya Religion (1580–1720)," in *Continuity and Change: Maya Religious Practices in Temporal Perspective*, eds. Daniel Graña-Behrens et al. (Anton Saurwein, 2004); John F. Chuchiak IV, "Writing as Resistance: Maya Graphic Pluralism and Indigenous Elite Strategies for Survival in Colonial Yucatan, 1550–1750," *Ethnohistory* 57, no. 1 (2010): 87–116; Matthew Restall, "Heirs to the Hieroglyphs: Indigenous Writing in Colonial Mesoamerica," *The Americas* 54, no. 2 (1997): 239–67.

[129] Houston et al., "Last Writing," 458–67; Houston, "Small Deaths," 248.

[130] Matsumoto, "Estela"; Sturm, "Old Writing"; Frank Tzib, "Revitalizing Ancient Knowledge: A Community-Based Outreach Project Sharing Classic Maya Epigraphy in Ox Mul Kah (San Antonio), Belize" (poster presented at the 88th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, Portland, OR, April 1, 2023).

[131] David F. Mora-Marín, "Full Phonetic Complementation, Semantic Classifiers, and Semantic Determinatives in Ancient Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 19 (2008): 195–213.

[132] Dieter Dütting, "On the Context-Dependent Use of Bi-and Polyvalent Graphemes in Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing," in *Fourth Palenque Round Table, 1980*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute, 1985); James A. Fox and John S. Justeson, "Polyvalence in Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing," in Justeson and Campbell, *Phoneticism*.

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much of the lexical meaning, syllabic signs are crucial to the writing system's function because they represent personal pronouns, verbal endings, prepositions, and other morphosyntactic elements whose abstract, context-dependent meaning would be very difficult to communicate logographically. They also complement logographic readings to provide phonetic hints about the latter's pronunciation.[133]

The logo-syllabic writing system is fully equipped to express spoken language. The primary one associated with the script, which epigraphers today commonly refer to as Classic Mayan, likely represents a long-extinct member of the Ch'olti'an subgroup of Mayan languages.[134] Nonetheless, hieroglyphic texts from across the region and especially from outside the central lowlands bear traces of dialectal variation, hinting at the diglossic context in which many writers were operating.[135] Features from vernacular Mayan languages that appear in some hieroglyphic inscriptions include substitution of the prepositional forms *ti* and *ta*,[136] alternation between

[133] Nikolai Grube, "Preposed Phonetic Complements in Maya Hieroglyphic Writing," in Carlin and Van de Kerke, *Linguistics and Archaeology*; Stephen Houston et al., "Disharmony in Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: Linguistic Change and Continuity in Classic Society," in *Anatomía de una civilización: Aproximaciones interdisciplinarias a la cultura maya*, eds. Andrés Ciudad Real et al. (Sociedad Española de Estudios Mayas, 1998); Kelley, *Deciphering*, 179–80; Floyd G. Lounsbury, "On the Derivation and Reading of the 'Ben-Ich' Prefix," in *Mesoamerican Writing Systems*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Dumbarton Oaks, 1973), 138.

[134] Stephen Houston et al., "The Language of Classic Maya Inscriptions," *Current Anthropology* 41, no. 3 (2000): 321–56; Stephen D. Houston et al., "More on the Language of Classic Maya Inscriptions," *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 4 (2001): 558–59; see recent summary by Danny Law and David Stuart, "Classic Mayan: An Overview of Language in Ancient Hieroglyphic Script," in *The Mayan Languages*, eds. Judith L. Aissen et al. (Routledge, 2017).

[135] José M. García Campillo, *Estudio introductorio del léxico de las inscripciones de Chichén Itzá, Yucatán* (Archaeopress, 2000), 161–69; Sven Gronemeyer, "E Pluribus Unum: Embracing Vernacular Influences in a Classic Mayan Scribal Tradition," in *A Celebration of the Life and Work of Pierre Robert Colas*, eds. Frauke Sachse and Christophe Helmke (Anton Saurwein, 2014); Alfonso Lacadena García-Gallo and Søren Wichmann, "The Dynamics of Language in the Western Lowland Maya Region," in *Art for Archaeology's Sake: Material Culture and Style across the Disciplines*, eds. Andrea Waters-Rist et al. (Chacmool/The Archaeological Association of the University of Calgary, 2005); Mary Kate Kelly, "Speech Carved in Stone: Language Variation among the Ancient Lowland Maya" (PhD dissertation, Tulane University, 2022), 247–63; Martha J. Macri, "A Descriptive Grammar of Palenque Mayan" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1988), 26–40; Gabrielle Vail and Martha J. Macri, "Introduction to Special Issue: Language and Dialect in the Maya Hieroglyphic Script," *Written Language and Literacy* 3, no. 1 (2000): 1–11.

[136] Nicholas P. Carter, "Paleographic Trends and Linguistic Processes in Classic Ch'olti'an: A Spatiotemporal Distributional Analysis" (MA thesis, Brown University, 2009), 17–21; Martha J. Macri, "Prepositions and Complementizers in the Classic Period Inscriptions," in *Sixth Palenque Round Table, 1986*, eds. Virginia Fields and Merle Greene Robertson (University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).

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velar and glottal spirants,[137] verbal morphology typical of non-Ch'olti'an languages,[138] and inconsistent use of vowel disharmonic versus harmonic spellings.[139] Nonetheless, as an elite lingua franca, Classic Mayan predominated as the language written throughout the hieroglyphs' attested history, even in areas where most of the population was almost surely speaking another, not necessarily mutually intelligible Mayan language.[140]

SOURCING CLASSIC MAYA HIEROGLYPHS

Classic Maya elites lived in scores of distinct communities distributed across the lowlands, and they participated in a shared regional tradition of writing and ritual in different ways and for a variety of purposes. Understanding the co-practice and circulation of hieroglyphic writing and ritual offers insight into interactions between groups that participated in a shared culture even as they may have found themselves at odds in political contexts. At the same time, knowledge and physical behaviors entailed in practicing ritual or writing hieroglyphs disappear with their practitioners. Thus, archaeologists must rely on their material traces to draw conclusions about what happened and what it meant. In the case of writing, close analysis of graphic form presents a window into how scribes learned and practiced their craft. Likewise, to study ritual in the distant past, scholars rely on images and texts that record relevant concepts, figures, or events, as well as material evidence that ritual performance may have left behind.

The material evidence mustered over the following chapters to illustrate religion's role in writing's development is as diverse, perhaps even eclectic, as Classic Maya rituals themselves. This breadth is a necessary response to the challenges of studying the hieroglyphic script's history. The Classic Maya

[137] Nikolai Grube, "The Orthographic Distinction between Velar and Glottal Spirants in Maya Hieroglyphic Writing," in The *Linguistics of Maya Writing*, ed. Søren Wichmann (University of Utah Press, 2004).

[138] Zachary X. Hruby and Mark Child, "Chontal Linguistic Influence in Ancient Maya Writing: Intransitive Positional Verbal Affixation," in Wichmann, *Linguistics*; Alfonso Lacadena García-Gallo, "Antipassive Constructions in the Maya Glyphic Texts," *Written Language and Literacy* 3, no. 1 (2000): 155–80; Marc Zender, "The Classic Mayan Causative," *The PARI Journal* 20, no. 2 (2020): 28–40.

[139] Nikolai Grube, "On Classic Maya Inscriptions," *Current Anthropology* 41, no. 5 (2000): 837–38; Houston et al., "Disharmony"; Lisardo Pérez Lugones, "Transformación y evolución de la representación glífica de los antropónimos de los gobernantes mexicas prehispánicos," *Revista Española de Antropología Americana* 52, no. 2 (2022): 335–57.

[140] Houston et al., "Language of Classic Maya Inscriptions;" Houston et al., "More on the Language"; Law and Stuart, "Classic Mayan"; David F. Mora-Marín et al., "The Linguistic Affiliation of Classic Lowland Mayan Writing and the Historical Sociolinguistic Geography of the Mayan Lowlands," in *The Ch'orti' Maya Area: Past and Present*, eds. Brent E. Metz et al. (University Press of Florida, 2009).

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corpus is exponentially smaller than the surviving bodies of writing for ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, or China. Current estimates posit approximately 12,000 known Classic Maya texts containing some 1,000 distinct graphs, of which 30 percent remain phonetically or semantically undeciphered.[141] For ancient Egypt, in contrast, more than 10,000 inscriptions have been documented just in the temples at Karnak.[142] Approximate cuneiform text counts solely from the Ur III period (2112–2004 BCE) exceed more than five- to sevenfold the total number of extant Classic Maya inscriptions.[143] By the mid-twentieth century, the Mesopotamian cuneiform corpus was estimated at over a half-million texts,[144] and oracle bones alone already account for well over 100,000 of the extant inscriptions from ancient China.[145]

We will never know to what degree, if at all, the Maya corpus' exponentially smaller size reflects a fundamentally lower volume of text production compared to the other three world regions. Ongoing archaeological excavations across the lowlands continue to uncover additional inscriptions that may contribute to future advances in hieroglyphic decipherment. Several factors have conspired to limit the quantity of extant texts available to us today, however. The first concerns population size and density. Compared to ancient China in particular, the Classic Maya pool of potential text producers and users was much smaller. Current estimates for the Maya lowlands, an area of some 95,000 km^2, posit a population of 9.5–16 million during the Late Classic period, when settlement density peaked at up to 180–305 persons per km^2.[146] The Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–221 BCE), in contrast, administered a territory about twice that size, where

[141] Christian M. Prager, "Visual Dimensions of Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: Meanings Beyond the Surface," in *The Social and Cultural Contexts of Historic Writing Practices*, eds. Philip J. Boyes et al. (Oxbow Books, 2021), 101.

[142] Sébastien Biston-Moulin and Christophe Theirs, "The Karnak Project: A Comprehensive Edition of the Largest Ancient Egyptian Temple," in *Crossing Experiences in Digital Epigraphy: From Practice to Discipline*, eds. Annamaria De Santis and Irene Rossi (De Gruyter, 2018), 157.

[143] See Steven J. Garfinkle, "The Third Dynasty of Ur and the Limits of State Power in Early Mesopotamia," in *From the 21st Century BC to the 21st Century AD*, eds. Steven J. Garfinkle and Manuel Molina (Eisenbrauns, 2013), fig. 1; Michael P. Streck, "Großes Fach Altorientalistik: Der Umfang des keilschriftlichen Textkorpus," *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft zu Berlin* 142 (2010): 53.

[144] Samuel Noah Kramer, "Cuneiform Studies and the History of Literature: The Sumerian Sacred Marriage Texts," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 107, no. 6 (1963): 485–527; see detailed survey by Streck, "Großes Fach."

[145] Hung-hsiang Chou, "Chinese Oracle Bones," *Scientific American* 240, no. 4 (1979): 136; David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (University of California Press, 1978), 57.

[146] Marcello A. Canuto et al., "Ancient Lowland Maya Complexity as Revealed by Airborne Laser Scanning of Northern Guatemala," *Science* 36, no. 6409 (2018): eaau0137; Francisco Estrada-Belli et al., "New Regional-Scale Classic Maya Population Density Estimates and Settlement Distribution Models through Airborne Lidar Scanning," *Journal of Archaeological Science Reports* 66 (2025): 105288.

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the early eighth-century population of 10–15 million is thought to have swelled by the late third century to 30–40 million.[147]

Differences in geographic extent are less pronounced for the other two regions, where settlement concentrated along major rivers flowing through otherwise arid land. An area of 12,000 km^2 in southern Mesopotamia is believed to have hosted 5.4–18 people per km^2, and the northern region may have had a similar total population packed into a smaller area (29–60 persons/km^2).[148] Nonetheless, the geographic distribution of cuneiform extends far beyond the Tigris-Euphrates river system, and major centers of text production outside that region included Ḫattuša and Kaneš (Kültepe) in central Anatolia and Pārsa (Persepolis) in southern Iran.[149] A total population of 1–3 million has been estimated over 18,000 km^2 of arable land in Old Kingdom Egypt, in turn, with an average density of 93–165 people per km^2.[150]

More decisive than population counts are differences in material and environment. The drier conditions of China and especially Egypt have been more conducive to preservation of writing on fragile material surfaces such as bamboo, silk, or papyrus. The same may be said of Mesopotamia, although widespread use of clay as a writing surface was probably more critical for preservation there than the arid environment. In the subtropical Maya lowlands, in contrast, humidity and seasonal rains – not to mention periodic hurricanes and other violent storms – have destroyed almost all perishable text carriers.[151] Environmental and climatic conditions favor stone and other more durable media, which tend to record political histories and information about the artifacts' owner and usage.[152] Other genres that may have been commonly

[147] Dingxin Zhao, *The Confucian-Legalist State: A New Theory of Chinese History* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 82–84, 86.

[148] Bruce G. Trigger, *Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 110, 293; T. J. Wilkinson, "Regional Approaches to Mesopotamian Archaeology: The Contribution of Archaeological Surveys," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 8, no. 3 (2000): 249.

[149] Rune Rattenborg et al., "The Archaeological Distribution of the Cuneiform Corpus: A Provisional Quantitative and Geospatial Survey," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 50, no. 2 (2023): 195, fig. 11.

[150] Trigger, *Understanding Early Civilizations*, 111, 297.

[151] For example, Nicholas P. Carter and Jeffrey Dobereiner, "Multispectral Imaging of an Early Classic Maya Codex Fragment from Uaxactun, Guatemala," *Antiquity* 90, no. 351 (2016): 711–25; Stephen Houston et al., "Information Storage & the Classic Maya," *Maya Decipherment* (blog), May 19, 2017, https://decipherment.wordpress.com/2017/05/19/information-storage-the-classic-maya/.

[152] Stephen D. Houston and Karl A. Taube, "'Name-Tagging' in Classic Mayan Script: Implications for Native Classifications of Ceramics and Jade Ornament," *Mexicon* 9, no. 2 (1987): 38–41; John S. Justeson, "Mayan Hieroglyphic 'Name-Tagging' of a Pair of Rectangular Jade Plaques from Xcalumkin," in *Contributions to Maya Hieroglyphic Decipherment I*, ed. Stephen D. Houston (Human Relations Area Files, 1983); Stuart, "Proper Names," 165–70.

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recorded on barkpaper, palm leaves, and other perishable surfaces are essentially unrepresented in the extant corpus.[153] Unfortunately, the Classic Maya almost never composed hieroglyphs on pottery sherds or stone flakes, unlike ancient Egyptians, who produced thousands of inscribed ostraca.

The third factor underlying the relatively limited number of Classic Maya texts boils down to basic chronology. First human presence in Mesoamerica has been dated to at least 11,000 years ago,[154] roughly coeval with the earliest evidence for plant and animal domestication in the Near East.[155] Consequently, the timeline of early writing in Mesoamerica is delayed by several centuries compared to ancient China and more than two millennia relative to Mesopotamia and Egypt. The three latter traditions had, simply put, more time – at the beginning, but also at the end. The decline of cuneiform in Mesopotamia and hieroglyphic writing in Egypt, in each case following more than three millennia of use, was gradual and, although influenced by pressure from groups with other scripts, was not coerced.[156] Maya hieroglyphs, in contrast, were abandoned rapidly under colonial duress.[157] Untold scores of hieroglyphic documents were destroyed beginning in the early sixteenth century, and generations of Catholic missionaries systematically suppressed Maya writing as a vestige of precontact paganism.[158]

Despite these challenges, however, Classic Maya writing offers a superlative case for studying the co-transmission of ritual and scribal practice in archaeological context. The hieroglyphic script is one of the best-documented forms of cultural knowledge from ancient Mesoamerica. Many inscriptions contain precise internal dates down to the year or even the day, permitting detailed analysis of chronological change. Most text-bearing objects can be associated

[153] Houston, "Into the Minds" 149.

[154] Georges A. Pearson, "Bridging the Gap: An Updated Overview of Clovis across Middle America and its Techno-Cultural Relation with Fluted Point Assemblages from South America," *PaleoAmerica* 3, no. 3 (2017): 203–30; Óscar R. Solís-Torres et al., "Pleistocene-Holocene Human Palaeoecology in Southern Mexico: Stable Isotopic Evidence from the Santa Marta Cave, Chiapas," *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 39 (2021): 103131; Michael R. Waters and Thomas W. Stafford, "Redefining the Age of Clovis: Implications for the Peopling of the Americas," *Science* 315, no. 5815 (2007): 1122–26.

[155] Melinda A. Zeder, "The Origins of Agriculture in the Near East," *Current Anthropology* 52, no. S4 (2011): S221–35.

[156] See Jeremy Black, "The Obsolescence and Demise of Cuneiform Writing in Elam," in Baines et al., *Disappearance*; David Brown, "Increasingly Redundant: The Growing Obsolescence of the Cuneiform Script in Babylonia from 539 BC," in Baines et al., *Disappearance*; Martin Andreas Stadler, "On the Demise of Egyptian Writing: Working with a Problematic Source Basis," in Baines et al., *Disappearance*.

[157] Houston et al., "Last Writing."

[158] Chuchiak, "Images"; Chuchiak, "Writing"; Restall, "Heirs."

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with a specific site of origin based on archaeological or epigraphic data, which allows us to situate their hieroglyphic contents within local contexts of production and use.[159] Finally, considering the modest size of hieroglyphic corpus, surviving texts represent a relatively diverse range of media, from limestone and stucco to bone, jade, and wood. The material variation attests to a breadth of intended audiences and to the diverse settings in which the Classic Maya engaged with writing.

MODEL, PATRON, PRACTICE: CLASSIC MAYA SCRIBES

Before introducing the text artifacts that they used or produced, the practitioners of Classic Maya writing deserve closer examination. In general terms, scribes belonged to a vaguely defined elite that enjoyed social and material priority over most members of society.[160] The best evidence for historical scribes comes in the form of signatures that they left behind in a small minority of inscriptions.[161] Otherwise, the Classic Maya hieroglyphic corpus lacks explicit sources about scribal knowledge or practice, in contrast to the other three world regions where writing was invented. In ancient Mesopotamia, scholars have identified a relative wealth of surviving texts from or about school and scholarly contexts.[162] Pharaonic Egypt offers rich sources on education for scribes, including extensive samples of the knowledge that they acquired in subjects such as mathematics and medicine.[163] China in particular stands out cross-culturally for its robust body of scribal metadiscourse that

[159] For example, Christophe Helmke and Jaime J. Awe, "Death Becomes Her: An Analysis of Panel 3, Xunantunich, Belize," *The PARI Journal* 16, no. 4 (2016): 1–14; Christophe Helmke and Jaime J. Awe, "Sharper than a Serpent's Tooth: A Tale of the Snake-Head Dynasty as Recounted on Xunantunich Panel 4," *The PARI Journal* 17, no. 2 (2016): 1–22; Simon Martin, "The Caracol Hieroglyphic Stairway," *Maya Decipherment* (blog), January 20, 2017, https://decipherment.wordpress.com/2017/01/20/the-caracol-hieroglyphic-stairway/; Alexandre Tokovinine, "Of Snake Kings and Cannibals: A Fresh Look at the Naranjo Hieroglyphic Stairway," *The PARI Journal* 7 (2007): 15–22.

[160] Takeshi Inomata, "The Power and Ideology of Artistic Creation: Elite Craft Specialists in Classic Maya Society," *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 3 (2001): 321–49; Takeshi Inomata, "Knowledge and Belief in Artistic Production by Classic Maya Elites," *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 17, no. 1 (2007): 129–41.

[161] Stephen D. Houston, "Crafting Credit: Authorship among Classic Maya Painters and Sculptors," in *Making Value, Making Meaning: Techné in the Pre-Columbian World*, ed. Cathy L. Costin (Dumbarton Oaks, 2016).

[162] Eleanor Robson, "The Tablet House: A Scribal School in Old Babylonian Nippur," *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 95, no. 1 (2001): 39–66; Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 10–38; Mark Weeden, "Adapting to New Contexts: Cuneiform in Anatolia," in Radner and Robson, *Oxford Handbook*, 605–10.

[163] Baines, *Visual and Written Culture*; Hellmut Brunner, *Altägyptische Erziehung* (Harrassowitz, 1957); Ronald J. Williams, "Scribal Training in Ancient Egypt," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92, no. 2 (1972): 214–21.

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stretches back to the early first century CE and includes generations of commentary on written form and content alike.[164]

If there ever existed Classic Maya records of the kind available to scholars of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, or China about how and with whom writing was learned and practiced, they have not survived the ravages of environment, human activity, and time. We know relatively little about scribes' social identities or roles, and what we do know has to be inferred from meticulous examination of the limited available data and judicious anthropological comparison.[165] Consequently, any study of scribes must focus on more indirect evidence, including that gleaned from the hieroglyphs that they produced. The following chapters do not reveal any new sources; instead, they explore known sources in novel ways. In other words, I address many of the same inscriptions that have supported previous epigraphic studies of Classic Maya civilization. Instead of key actors or events in politics and social history, though, I focus on what people are said to have done, with whom or what and where, and the hieroglyphic forms in which this information is recorded. The ritual events, practitioners, and paraphernalia documented in thousands of Classic Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions are largely known to specialists, but there have been few prior attempts to connect these insights in any systematic way to the graphic forms that recorded them.[166]

Classic Maya scribes, the subject of Chapter 3, embodied the connection between writing and ritual by virtue of their craft, which was an invention of the gods. A singular representative of this role was the divine patron of the hieroglyphs, a monkey scribe who embodied a model for hieroglyphic practice derived from the script's primordial origins.[167] The supernatural simian offers a glimpse of the intrinsic connection between writing and religion, a link that was deeply embedded in practice and mythology alike. The monkey scribe and his other-than-human peers were creators whose rarified knowledge extended beyond graphic form and language to include divinatory, astronomical, and other information recorded with their script. Scribal practice entailed

[164] Amy McNair, "Engraved Calligraphy in China: Recension and Reception," *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (1995): 106–14; Amy McNair, " Looking at Chinese Calligraphy: The Anxiety of Anonymity and Calligraphy from the Periphery," in *Looking at Asian Art*, eds. Katherine R. Tsiang and Martin J. Powers (The Center for the Art of East Asia, 2012).

[165] Cecil H. Brown, "Hieroglyphic Literacy in Ancient Mayaland: Inferences from Linguistic Data," *Current Anthropology* 32, no. 4 (1991): 489–96; Houston, "Literacy."

[166] See James L. Fitzsimmons, *Death and the Classic Maya Kings* (University of Texas Press, 2009), 25–48, 105–61; Matthew G. Looper, *To Be Like Gods: Dance in Ancient Maya Civilization* (University of Texas Press, 2009), 15–44; Jessica Munson et al., "Ritual Diversity and Divergence of Classic Maya Dynastic Traditions: A Lexical Perspective on Within-Group Cultural Variation," *Latin American Antiquity* 27, no. 1 (2016): 74–95.

[167] Coe, "Supernatural Patrons."

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engaging not only with these divine role models but with the knowledge encoded in the hieroglyphs that they had created.

As human custodians of the script, Classic Maya scribes were set apart from those members of society who were unable to access or understand the sacred inscriptions. At the same time, their contingent social position required cultivating and maintaining relations with the gods and ancestors. Portraits of their other-than-human counterparts, as well as the ritualized components of writing practice, were a constant reminder to human scribes of the hieroglyphs' ultimate source and the wisdom that their texts recorded.

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