

ON PRE-COLUMBIAN NARRATIVE:
REPRESENTATION ACROSS
the WORD-IMAGE DIVIDE

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WHAT WE KNOW OF ANCIENT America, as with any portion of the human past, comes to us only in the form of traces. Randomly sampled, stripped of their original context, and usually preserved only in vestigial form, they are dredged from chronological depths and beached on the shores of the modern world. We inspect them, prod them, hold them to the light. We ask them what they mean, or more often, what they meant. For however closely we chart continuities among descendent peoples, or bring our full armory of analyses down upon them, we know that they are tokens from worlds irretrievably lost to us. However real they were in their own time, such domains now live only in our imaginations.

We use traces as clues to past existence, as evidence for how ancient societies shaped their environment and tackled the shared necessities of subsistence and shelter. And yet all but the most prosaic of these activities are colored by social convention and must be read as cultural acts. Thus, before we have hardly begun, we are forced into higher ambitions: into practicing an archaeology of the mind that seeks to enter and in some sense re-animate the world of ideas that gave past cultures their identity and compass. In pursuit of this we naturally focus attention upon the most overt expressions of past mentalities: on the marks, symbols, notations, and representations that have survived them. In other words, on those artifacts ancient societies themselves freighted with significance and intended to be instruments of communication.¹

Each of these objects embodies a series of values—conceptual, informational, aesthetic—that are articulated in material form. It is these articulations that we describe and scrutinize by means of iconography, iconology, epigraphy, paleography, and philology, among

¹ For the same sentiment see Berlo 1983: 18.

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others. With good reason, these approaches tackle targeted, culturally specific dimensions of the message. But to take on the charge of this essay, to discuss the role of words, signs, and symbols across the Pre-Columbian world, requires a rather broader field of enquiry. The need for a common frame and vocabulary, one that allows us to compare and contrast the diverse products of societies separated by great temporal as well as geographic distance, draws us toward more systemic approaches, such as those of semiology and information theory. Both address the nature and operation of sign systems, the transformative processes through which an intent to communicate is first realized, then transferred and received. Overlapping with many of the interests of art and literary theory, philosophy, psychology, and neurology, these disciplines seek to describe the underlying principles at work in human communications. As such, they concern themselves not with meaning but with the means of meaning.²

At root, our archaeology of the mind will always be an attempt at empathy. But even this, the most humanistic of endeavors, requires structural understandings of its subject: taxonomies, typologies, and classifications that allow us to order and comprehend our sources. Deliberate marks made on durable surfaces can fulfill a great range of expressive desires, but those capable of transferring a “message” are born of some system, code, or language. Defining something of the rules and conventions governing such marks precedes any attempt to wrestle significance from them. This overtly structural approach to communicative artifacts is only one of several ways in which we might view them (others include their phenomenological effects, their nature as performance, and so on). But however else a unitary view of Pre-Columbian culture might be assembled, we need to have the fullest understanding possible of elemental issues of semiotic construction and its modes of communication—the one-time conduits of social conditioning, political and religious power, and even now, the channels we hope to re-energize and “speak” once more.

The canvas before us is clearly an immense one and we must confine our discussion here to a few select areas. The first section of this paper discusses certain aspects of sign theory, particularly the way communicative artifacts interact with a background of cultural texts. This lays the groundwork for the second section, which looks at how narrative is represented in the ancient Americas, examining the means by which Pre-Columbian peoples told stories to themselves (and only inadvertently to us).

² The cornerstones of semiology remain the teachings of its twin founding fathers Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), famed for his dyadic model of the sign as a paired signifier-signified, and Charles Sanders Peirce (1834–1914), creator of the contrasting triadic view of sign-interpretant-object.

WORD, SIGN, AND TEXTSCAPE

We approach images armed with a lifetime's learning, not only of artistic mores and conventions, but also of a literary heritage that runs unbroken in the Western tradition to the Iliad and more fitfully to the Bible and beyond. Both embedded in our individual psyche and shared across our collective consciousness, such textual understandings are less an aid to decoding Western art than a prerequisite.³ Our response to any single work—be it laden with Christian symbolism, the subtler social codes of portraiture and landscape, or for that matter avant-garde Modernism—is governed by understandings wholly external to the image itself. The key to cognition therefore lies in what we bring to it. Without this meeting between a signal and core elements of its foreknowledge, signs are mute, meaningless, or ambiguous beyond use.⁴

It is these a priori understandings that we clearly lack for the New World. We approach Pre-Columbian messages as foreigners, unversed in their essential underpinnings, having only half-heard the tiniest fraction of the stories and none of the explanatory primers. The literary works and historical accounts that have come down to us—valuable though they are—are available for only a few regions, shallow in time-depth and invariably refracted through European perceptions of one kind or another. Naturally, we prize these tenuous contacts; in the same way we do those cultural continuities that survive among modern descendents. But neither can compensate for the scale of what is lost.

Were any illustration of this necessary we need only compare two faces (Figs. 1, 2). The first is loaded with innumerable associations for us: from the identity of an historical individual, to a chain of narrative episodes, to a whole spiritual and moral universe replete with



FIG. 1 (left) French Medieval sculpture in wood (photo courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art).

FIG. 2 (right) Zapotec Urn, K5841 (photo © Justin Kerr).

3 E.g., Panofsky 1939: 11; Steiner 1982: 9; Winter 1985: 12.

4 Recognition clearly implies the possession of an existing model—that we only comprehend what, to a surprising degree, we already know (a notion that constantly recurs in neurological paradigms of cognition and memory, e.g., Spoehr and Lehmkuhle 1982). The component of the message that we might regard as “new” exists within strict parameters of permissible innovation.

contemporary social, political, and ethnic ramifications. We find the second close to empty in meaning because so little of its immediate referent, let alone its wider network of connotations, has survived the boundary that separates us from the society that created and used it. It is not the formal familiarity of one, the formal strangeness of the other, that renders one meaningful, the other enigmatic: it is the knowledge or ignorance of the work's inspirational text.⁵

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So the point is not simply that we experience a disabling lack of context when we look into the Pre-Columbian past, but that this deficit is intimately bound up with the differing survival of words and images. The Pre-Columbian image is one violently stripped of its verbal foils and counterparts and the dialogue between image and word inherent in every communicative artifact has been made all but inaudible to us. A product of the fundamental divide in our sensory apparatus between sight and sound, the "word-image" dichotomy has had a pivotal role in debates on representation from the dawn of Western philosophy till the present day. Commonsense stresses their distinctiveness, but under examination they seem ever entwined in binary pairings of shifting significance. Dominance for one brings it into discernible form, casting the other into latency and concealment.⁶ Their affinity and contrast, collaboration and conflict, make them the very stuff of cultural meaning, whether ancient or modern, and inevitably Pre-Columbianists have been drawn to these same issues.⁷

Representation—in contrast to presentation—always involves the absence of its subject, and concerns ways in which it can be replicated, signaled, or denoted, any one of which takes us into the realm of signs.⁸ We know full well that the sense of any sign is culturally determined and emerges from processes that are at once intimate and personal, public and social. Meaning is formed rather than simply retrieved, in an active rather than passive process in which significance is created collaboratively at the point where a sign meets its interpreter.

[I]f meaning is embedded in the text, the reader's responsibilities are limited to the job of getting it out; but if meaning develops, and if it develops in a dynamic relationship with the reader's expectations, projections, conclusions, judg-

5 The term "text" is used here and throughout this essay to mean any coherent arrangement of sensible signs.

6 Mitchell 1986; 1994.

7 Word-image issues have been of interest to Pre-Columbianists in a variety of ways, reflected both in the form of edited volumes (Berlo 1983; Hanks and Rice 1989; Boone and Mignolo 1994), and individual articles or book chapters (e.g., Berlo 1983; Clancy 1983; 1986; Miller 1983, 1989; Miller and Houston 1987; Cohodas 1989; Hanks 1989; Reents-Budet 1989; Bassie-Sweet 1991: Ch. 2; Boone 1994a; 2000: Ch. 3).

8 Summers 1991: 241.

ments, and assumptions, these activities (the things the reader *does*) are not merely instrumental, or mechanical, but essential, and the act of description must both begin and end with them.” (Fish 1980: 2–3)

We instinctively resist the idea that messages are invitations to create meaning, rather than packages whose contents need only be unwrapped. But a message, whatever its component bundle of signals and codes, its realization in channel, media, and form, remains in many respects empty. Like all signs and sign-groups, it works not as a container for meaning but as an index (in its broadest sense) that points elsewhere: evoking memories of, and drawing analogies with signs elsewhere. Sign systems operate, above all, by engineering relationships between present and absent elements. These processes are in the final instance internal: exchanges between our personal psyche and its neurological hardwiring. Yet so much of this wider realm of meaning is drawn from cultural understandings, from life-long learning within human communities that individual perception and interpretation are always conditioned by a social dimension. Signs cannot be designed for “all-comers,” and can only properly function in reference to the social matrix within which they were created. Stanley Fish has dubbed those with this sign literacy an interpretive community.⁹

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Interpretive communities are both the producers and consumers of texts, the agents and recipients of their meaning. It is from their exchanges that standards and conventions are established as common codes. This extends to form, since “design” and “style” are, in addition to their aesthetic value, types of coding that seek to shape meaning—intended not to please the eye so much as to promote certain kinds of access and response.¹⁰ This means that we cannot ignore the materiality of the sign or sign-vehicle. Factors here include its scale (both absolute in terms of human proportions and relative to its surroundings); its physical properties of substance, texture, and color; as well as its placement in regard to adjacent signs and viewing context (the contrast, say, between an architectural space and appearance in book form). Each evokes levels of signification and become key features of sign sense.¹¹

⁹ Fish 1980.

¹⁰ In the original two-part model of Saussure every “sign” is linked to its intended “signified.” But later thinkers have emphasized the factors that complicate this ideal, that signs can be interpreted in many ways depending on the contribution of the individual reader and a range of other influences (Eco 1979; Fish 1980). Signs point less to a stable and predictable meaning than to a “semantic field,” a range of aligned but nonetheless subtly different understandings individual to each viewer/reader (Scholes 1981: 203–205).

¹¹ Veltrusky 1976; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 39.

It is already clear that an interpretive community works on at least two levels of comprehension. Signs are understood both within a broad context—a culturally determined way of seeing/reading that provides necessary codes and models—and a rather narrower view in which prior knowledge of more individual elements of form or a specific story, the possession of a text, is both assumed and required.¹²

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That part of a culture's collective consciousness that takes the form of accrued statements or stories, from myth to history, from epics to annals, whether high poetry or low prose—that is, the totality of ideas and events, real or imagined, that can be rendered as discourse and communicated within and between generations—we might characterize here as its "textscape." At its core lies a relatively stable region of foundational mythologies and legends, archetypal stories that play a central role in defining common culture. But outside this zone textscapes can be remodeled by text creation, appropriation, transformation, obsolescence, or extirpation. By definition, much is universally known and shared, but certain parts always contain local, specialized, or restricted knowledge that speak only to smaller sub-communities. Such sub-communities include stratified or task-specific groups within single societies, but also develop from the broader segmentation we might find in a divided political landscape, or the diversity that emerges over a large geographic area.

In pre-Modern societies the dominant repository of the textscape resides in memory, and its representation in story telling and performance; that is, in a world of personal auditory and visual experience.¹³ Oral texts are first codified in poetry and recitation structures—for both aesthetic and mnemonic purposes—preserving them, if in evolving form, for as long as their sustaining cultures have use for them.¹⁴ But since at least the Upper Paleolithic era (ca. 30,000 BC), humans have used their manipulative skills to make meaningful marks on their world. In so doing they invariably take the ephemera of memories, utterances, and gestures outside the human body and into new spaces and moments in time; converting transience into permanence, the invisible into the visible. It is this past impulse to record, display, and otherwise communicate in durable form that provides our sole access to extinct textscapes.

This should not be taken to mean that concrete representations are mere derivations of a performative world. Instead, source and representation interact in complex and dynamic ways, often with

¹² This clearly equates to the classic distinction between code and text, itself derived from Saussure's *langue* and *parole*.

¹³ E.g., Baron 1981: 89–90.

¹⁴ Vansina 1965; 1985; Ong 1967: 22–35; Connerton 1989.

the effect of dissolving or denying the boundary between them. In the case of illustrations, for example, while they necessarily simplify and omit great swathes of a given story, they also add layers of information—colors, shapes, and any manner of incidental detail—left unformed in either oral or written description.¹⁵ Elaborations such as these regularly feed back into such sources and change them. Because translations between any given channel, mode, and media can never be perfect—they always differ from their starting points—the act of representation itself generates new texts, and in so doing, new meanings.¹⁶ In this way the textscape is composed not only of distinct stories, but also of all previous efforts at their representation.

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NARRATIVE REPRESENTATION IN THE NEW WORLD

This preamble brings us to the question of how textscapes find their expression in the New World, and in what ways their surviving traces might be dissected to reveal their inner workings. Texts can be a number of things, but if they are our chosen route to map a Pre-Columbian consciousness, then we are obliged to take special interest in those that constitute narratives—our most direct points of access to ancient textscapes.

It has been said that we cannot comprehend the meaning of time, or history, or personal experience outside the narrative form, making it a universal of humankind throughout the ages.¹⁷ For all its centrality, and the weight of literature directed at the topic, defining exactly what we mean by “narrative” has seldom proved easy. At its broadest, we might include all discourses on human action, especially as they concern change to an existing state of affairs—usually describing both the reasons for that change and its consequences. Key components are: activity (what), identity (who), locality (where), and temporality (when). While we might consider any particular narrative self-contained, even the “thickest” and most detailed description leaves a universe of crucial information unstated. At every turn, texts feature indices that point to things that must be drawn from outside, imported from a cultural frame already known to the reader.

¹⁵ Hermerén 1969: 59; Schapiro 1973: 11.

¹⁶ Lotman 1990: 37. Every representation is therefore itself a text; if not necessarily one of comparable kind to the one that inspired it. Here the textscape accords with the principles of intertextuality (Kristeva 1980). As much as there is an axis that connects the author of a text to its reader, there is a bisecting one in which the text can be seen to interact with others in a potentially unending network.

¹⁷ Ricoeur 1983–84 (quoted in Boone 2000: 13); Barthes 1977.

Although structural analyses of literary narratives have mushroomed in recent decades, those concerned with pictorial narratives have always been rather thinner on the ground.¹⁸ Even less attention has been given to narrative from a “cross-channel” perspective, the ways in which it overarches and bridges the word-image divide by representation through both art and writing.

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The Russian Formalists of the 1920s produced the first structural schema of narratology (the study of narrative communication).¹⁹ This begins with the story (*fabula*), a chronologically coherent sequence in which the core logic of events unfold. Following this comes the plot or discourse (*sjuzhet*), which is the organization and expression of the story in communicable form.²⁰ It is at this level that not only issues of time-order, editing, and emphasis are settled, but decisions about the mode of representation enacted—the concrete expression of the narrative whether spoken, performed, written, or pictured.

Roland Barthes elaborated this analysis by isolating active elements within the discourse; of which the most relevant for us are the functions he termed nuclei, catalysts, informants, and indices.²¹ The nucleus refers to that part of a narrative episode that is central to its meaning and that cannot be removed without destroying the story’s sense. Surrounding the nucleus there are usually one or more catalysts. These work to support, enhance, and elaborate the nucleus, giving it context. Their removal would alter the story’s discourse, but not its basic sense. The next type, informants, situates the narrative in time and space or identify participants. They have an explicit function that contrasts with the implicit role of indices. These point to external elements that are not pictured but are nonetheless relevant to the story at hand. Any single story element can combine more than one function and, for example, might be both a catalyst and index, or an index and an informant. We will return to these types presently.

The transition from story to discourse involves not only its logical (re)organization but also its expression in a semiotic system. A choice must be made of sensory channel, whether visual or auditory, followed by parallel steps of encoding in a particular mode and physical realization: which for images is a medium, material,

18 See Weitzmann (1947), Kessler and Simpson (1985), Holliday (1993), Stansbury-O’Donnell (1999) for notable discussions of Old World pictorial narrative, and Reents-Budet (1989) and Quilter (1990; 1997) for its counterparts in the New World.

19 See Todorov 1969.

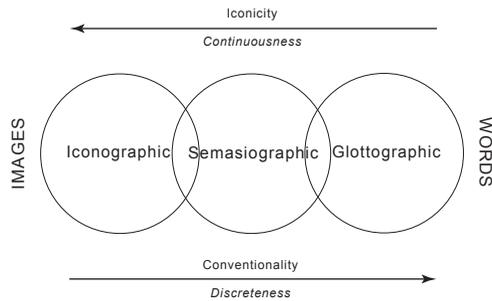
20 A notable current debate in narratology concerns the “Ur-narratives” the *fabula* requires. The traditional structuralist view sees certain archetypal stories of which there are many variants and derivatives (see Chatman 1978; 1981). The contrasting post-structuralist view is that every “version” is in fact an autonomous text (see Smith 1981). It will be noted that this is very much connected to the issue of source/representation discussed in relation to the textscape.

21 Barthes 1977. I have preferred Stansbury-O’Donnell’s “catalyst” (1999) over the “catalyzer” used by Barthes’s translator Stephen Heath.

and form. We can define a “mode” here as the particular type of encoding employed, while a “strategy” involves the orchestration of one or more modes to create the final message. In choosing to concentrate on representation as visible marks, our approach falls under André Leroi-Gourhan’s broad conception of *graphisme*.²² By trying to discern how different graphic techniques succeed in conveying narrative data, it is possible to construct a model of their inter-relationships. Such a schematic model is illustrated below.

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Here three modes of graphic representation traverse the distance between art and writing, picture and script, and these will become the focus of our remaining discussion. We begin at left with the iconographic mode, which encompasses everything we might other-wise call “illustrative” or “narrative art.” In the center we have the semasiographic, whose common appellation “picture-writing” succeeds in conveying its ambivalent position between images and words. Finally, at right, we have the glottographic, which includes all full writing systems: that is, signs that convey the sound values of language and are organized according to its syntax and grammar.



The arrows at top and bottom refer to the general character of the signs these modal types employ and their relative importance along a word-image axis.²³ At top, iconicity, a likeness or a notional resemblance to the world experienced by our senses (as we might see in a portrait or pictograph for example), increases in emphasis as we move to the left. By contrast conventionality, at bottom, in which the relationship between a sign and its signified is an arbitrary one agreed by convention (as we might find in a word or abstract symbol), gains in importance as we travel to the right. A corresponding pair describes qualities of texts. Thus continuousness is a feature of texts that are whole or in some way fused (like the elements that make up a naturalistic painting), while discreteness emphasizes individual

22 Leroi-Gourhan 1964–65. See also Elkins for his use of *gramma* (1999: 83). The work of Leroi-Gourhan was an acknowledged influence on Derrida (1976: 83–86) and his concept of *grammatology*—the idea of “writing” as a broad system of encoding and storage that properly begins in prehistory rather than with the invention of scripts.

23 See Lotman 1990: 16. It should be emphasized that the model is explicitly a narrative one—other objectives may vary the relationships between modes and sign qualities. Similar diagrammatic exercises have been undertaken by Elkins; although, by his own admission, without resolving a tripartite “domain of images” (1999: 85–86). The difficulty in that case seems to stem from the emphasis put on form at the expense of function. The model attempted here has a narrower goal in narrative representation and prioritizes operative function.

units whose meaning emerges from their setting and interaction within sequences or arrangements (like letters in a word, or words in a sentence).²⁴ While these vectors convey the general trends at work, we must be mindful that each mode also contains internal relationships between each of these qualities.

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The overlapping of modal domains emphasizes that these are not exclusive territories: that there will be cases where either or both adjoining modes may be said to operate in a single representation. Indeed, it is in these border regions where much of the creative energy in graphic communications takes place: as one mode reaches the limit of its expressive power and, almost visibly, strains against it. Moreover, in practice it is rare to find “pure” texts free of modal cross-fertilization, combination, and conflation. Very often a dominant mode will be “contaminated” with elements of another in order to achieve some expressive purpose it cannot fulfill alone.

While these modes may follow historical trajectories within individual cultures, they are expressly not ranked here in any evolutionary scale (from “simple” to “complex,” or still less from “primitive” to “advanced”). Rather, they are viewed as distinct approaches to graphic representation, each with their own advantages and limitations. Their use and combination into broader narrative strategies reflects individual cultural needs and preferences, as well as technological opportunities.

To discuss these three modes more fully I will illustrate each in turn by reference to a Pre-Columbian narrative tradition in which it takes a dominant (though never exclusive) role. In the case of the iconographic, this will be the fineline ceramic painting of the Moche; for the semasiographic, the screenfold manuscripts of the Mixtec; while the glottographic will be illustrated by Maya hieroglyphic writing.

THE ICONOGRAPHIC MODE

It is the pictorialism of the iconographic mode, its familiar associations with representational art, which first strikes the eye. Its essential feature is its ability to signify by “likeness” and “resemblance” to the world we experience around us. Iconographic narratives make the viewer a spectator, a witness, even a participant in an unfolding drama. As such, they have a theatrical quality akin to a moment of frozen performance. However imaginary or fantastical the object depicted, it is always grounded in the principles of

²⁴ The iconic-conventional distinction was a particular concern of Peirce, while the discrete-continuous opposition has been especially highlighted by Lotman (1990: 36).

sight. This iconic vein runs the gamut from overtly realistic images to pared-down schemata that do no more than allude to the world we perceive around us. Yet no matter how “abstract” an image may appear, so long as a common interpretative community understands its conventions there is no impediment to an iconic reading.²⁵ This highlights a wider truth that iconic perception is not truly “natural,” but acquired through a process of passive learning and subject to varying levels of coding and acculturated reading. Many studies have exposed the fallacy that images are comprehended “directly,” demonstrating instead that visual cognition emerges from a complex amalgam of personal experience, social conditioning, and the base physiology of eye and brain.²⁶

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Formal analysis of pictorial narrative has its origins in Classical studies, where rich written sources gave rise to a strongly hermetic, literary approach. In the descriptive typology popularized by Kurt Weitzmann the monoscenic represents a single moment from a story frozen in time and space, the simultaneous constitutes an artificial conflation of sequential events, and the cyclic provides an expanded number of scenes to capture time and plot progression.²⁷ This tripartite understanding has been refined and elaborated in recent years, but it has also been challenged, specifically by those who argue for the active life of images outside their representational role and who emphasize relationships not with literature but with other images.²⁸ Such criticisms are assuaged somewhat if our conception of the textscape combines, as it does, both visual and verbal sources as intertextual partners. While Weitzmann’s descriptive trio has its limitations, the successful application of each outside the Classical world, including in the New World, supports their fundamental relevance to story composition.²⁹

It is only in recent years that developments in literary narratology have had an impact on pictorial studies. Mark Stansbury-O’Donnell has adapted the four-part Barthes schema to Classical Greek ceramic painting to telling effect.³⁰ The approach allows pictured elements to be identified for their specific contributions

25 See Pasztor (1991) for an important study on the cultural valence of “abstraction” in the New World.

26 The art historian most closely associated with this assault on “natural” perception was Ernst Gombrich (e.g. 1960, 1981).

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27 Kurt Weitzmann (1947: 13–33) refined earlier work by Carl Robert and Franz Wickhoff.

28 See Stansbury-O’Donnell (1999: 1–8) for a review of subsequent work and new directions in Classical narratology.

29 E.g., Reents-Budet 1989: 189; Quilter 1997: 116.

30 Stansbury-O’Donnell 1999.

to narrative sense. The principal limitation is the degree to which this remains within the bounds of literary knowledge, largely trapped within an understanding of the myths portrayed and Classical culture itself, of which the contemporary Western perspective is a direct, if distant, descendent.

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Whichever type of iconographic representation is employed, we are still given no more than the barest snatches from vastly more complex tales. By any quantitative assessment the information presented in the picture plane of the monoscenic and simultaneous types, or even within the sequences of the cyclic, is negligible. The communicative power of the iconographic mode rests not in describing stories in any comprehensive way—in the actual telling of a tale—but in its potential as a “prompt”: its ability to spur, evoke, and elicit the memories of stories.³¹ It does this by supplying at least one recognizable nucleus, supported as necessary by catalysts, informants, and indices, to act as a *pars pro toto*—a part to represent a whole. Such devices engage the reader with their cultural textscape, bringing a specific part of it to mind.

Despite their strong sense of emulating personal visual experience, iconographic scenes are plainly far from simple freeze-frames in the manner of photographic reportage. We are presented instead with highly theatrical compositions, in which actors, props, and scenery are manipulated to best display and elucidate the central happening. Identifying attributes are placed prominently on view, with clarity of message subordinating aspects such as relative scale and point of view. Although images are continuous by nature, the particular requirements of narrative—its need to isolate interactive elements—often forces iconographic texts to be relatively discrete.

The difference between Weitzmann’s three types essentially lies in their contrasting approach to temporality. Even in the monoscenic type, the frozen moment itself inescapably implies the passage of time: in addition to a “now” it has an inherent “before” and “after.” Although what occurs in these temporal spaces is unstated and implicit, foreknowledge of the plot means that there is little or no ambiguity and the anticipation of the future turn of events, or reflection on preceding ones, is equally part of the viewing experience. The simultaneous type goes further of course, and can either imply a genuine time conflation or a sequential viewing experience—as we might read a scene from one side to the other (perhaps with a physical factor, such as turning a cylindrical vase in the hand). Finally, the

³¹ “We often find the story behind the image, therefore, demanding the reader’s prior knowledge and correct identification of the scene—a process of “matching” rather than “reading” of the scene” (Winter 1985: 12).

cyclic breaks the constraints of singularity and at a stroke creates the opportunity for change that is so central to narrative, providing a reverse telescoping of time and incident, and thereby allowing for the crucial feature of cause and effect.

Yet if, as we see in the monoscenic type, on-going narratives can be encoded in a single depiction, expressed in a single character's attitude or attribute, where does the boundary between narrative and simple representation lie? Standard treatments understandably examine pictorial narrative in the sense of evident freeze-frames or patently articulated sequences. Yet if we are interested in the ability of images to evoke stories in the mind of their audience we must be interested in all representations that might accomplish that task. Can we fully detach, for example, the depiction of certain supernatural or historical characters from the context that gives them relevance—that is, the accounts, legends, and myths in which their significance lies? What is the purpose of an “image” or “representation” if it does not serve as an index to all one knows about them? We can reach back to Aristotle here, who in *Poetics* insisted that while a plot can lack characters, there can be no character without plot.³² Clearly not all images are functional narratives. At the same time, most images have ties to sustaining texts and we can say that narrative remains a latent, inferential quality within them.

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At the opposite extreme, the narrative expansion of the cyclic, the free use not just of multiple nuclei but multiple appearances of the same actors, moves smartly away from the *pars pro toto* principle. Multiple nuclei develop the sense of “reading” over “recognition,” while the emergence of time-sequence allows us to receive the story in a way that imitates narrative time itself. The cyclic text can be compared to a comic strip lacking written captions or dialogue, and in one sense marks a key step toward semasiography.

A final consideration is the particular carrying-media and viewing contexts of iconographic texts—the materiality of their sign-vehicles. This is a mode rarely found in media of close scrutiny, such as books (unless combined with script in the form of illustration). Instead it is at home in architectural programs, as monumental relief carving or freestanding sculptures, or set on portable items both public and personal. There are, it seems, particular contexts in which the allusive power of iconographic narratives are appropriate and desirable, provoking intimate relationships between medium, context, and message. We may, as we do here, prioritize narrative form as our object of study, but that is not to overlook that the true purpose of the text is very often to imbue their carrying contexts with certain kinds of connotation or value.

32 Aristotle *Poetics*: 6.20–21; Barthes 1977: 104; Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999: 10.

Moche Fineline Painting

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FIG. 3 Moche fineline stirrup-spouted vessel from Phase IV (photo courtesy of the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History).

For a good example of iconographic narrative in the Pre-Columbian world we can turn to the fineline ceramic painting of the Moche from northern coastal Peru. Mostly rendered on the bodies of stirrup-spouted vessels, but also appearing on flared bowls, jars, and “dippers,” fineline work was used to create figural scenes in predominantly chocolate-brown slips on cream backgrounds (Fig. 3). Established typologies provide a minimal series of five phases, distinguished by vessel shape, construction technique, and painting style, spanning the whole period of Moche florescence from ca. AD 100 to 800.³³ The fineline style is iconic and comparatively naturalistic—a notable feature of Moche work in all media and something that separates it from the main thrust of South American art, with its strong leaning toward geometry and abstraction.³⁴

Recognition of the mythological focus of the scenes³⁵ has been followed by analyses of their content, revealing notable ties to both ethnographical and archaeological materials.³⁶ Work by Christopher Donnan has been instrumental in isolating individual themes, while Jeffrey Quilter has concentrated on their narrative content—most notably on the “Revolt of the Objects” story.³⁷ Applying both a structural approach and aspects of narratology to examples of this theme, it has been possible to link a number of individual

episodes into a more comprehensive story: placing the revolt (in which inanimate objects come to life and seize their human enemies) close to the start of a sequence that includes a boat journey and a presentation of blood-filled goblets (Fig. 4). Protagonists can be tracked through the

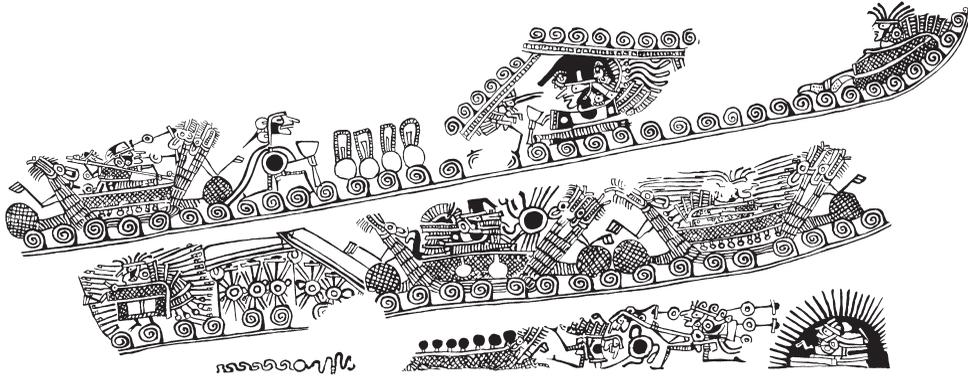
33 Larco Hoyle 1948; Donnan 1976; Donnan and McClelland 1999.

34 E.g., Cummins 1994.

35 Kutscher 1950.

36 Donnan 1988; Alva and Donnan 1993.

37 Donnan 1975; 1976; 1988; Donnan and McClelland 1979; 1999; Quilter 1990; 1997; 2001. See also Cordy-Collins 1977.



[69]

tale by means of their diagnostic features, allowing further ties to the fineline corpus to be made.³⁸ Such insights stem in large part from the emergence of two cyclic texts, whose fixed ground lines and sequential order provides the necessary key to unlock edited, monoscenic versions of the same tale seen elsewhere.

FIG. 4 The “Revolt of the Objects” narrative (drawing: Donna McClelland).

The monoscenic or simultaneous types offer stiffer challenges, but an attempt to apply the Barthes schema of discourse functions—in emulation of that performed on Greek vases—can be productive even if we lack a literary text to follow. In a well-known Presentation scene (Fig. 5a), the key event of the upper register involves the Rayed Deity and an anthropomorphic bird, which exchange a goblet believed to contain human blood.³⁹ This can be identified as the prime nucleus (N₁) not only by reference to internal pointers—such as their interactive pose, object manipulation, and prominence in the composition—but by fact that this action retains its central presence in attenuated versions of the same theme on other Moche ceramics (Fig. 5b).⁴⁰ This allows us to identify the rest of the ensemble cast as catalysts (C): witnesses and contributors who may be involved in prior or subsequent plot-lines but are less than essential to the meaning of the current episode. This is not true of two characters from the lower register, however, where an anthropomorphic creature (here a feline) sacrifices a human and collects his blood in a bowl or goblet. This is a separate nucleus (N₂) that similarly survives in the abbreviated versions. Although the executioner casts an upward glance, so as to connect the two nuclei, its

³⁸ Quilter 1997.

³⁹ Donnan 1975: 148.

⁴⁰ Donnan 1975: fig. 3.

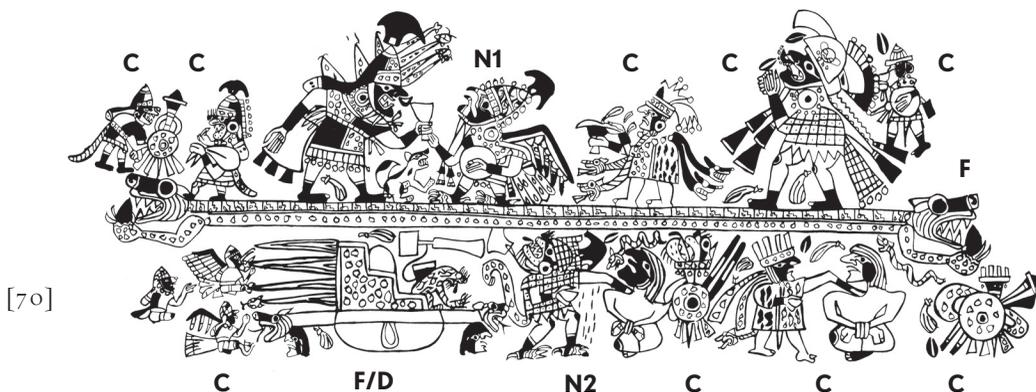


FIG. 5 Two versions of the “Presentation Theme” with a preliminary assignment of narrative functions: (top) An expanded version on a Phase IV vessel (above) An attenuated version on a small ceramic “dipper” (drawings Donna McClelland).

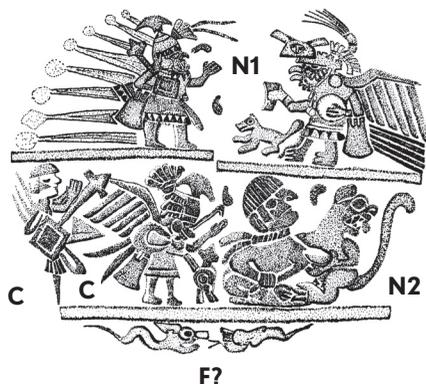


FIG. 6 Two types of informant seen in fineline paintings: (top) Locators: stylized waves and sea anemones indicate an ocean setting (bottom) Symbols: hummingbirds indicate the speed or intensity of an action (drawings Donna McClelland).

position in a lower register would appear to have more than spatial significance and seems likely to be placed earlier in time. This would be logical if he provides the blood used in the exchange scene. The bicephalic feline who divides the upper and lower fields seems to be more than a simple ground-line, quite probably an informant (F) that identifies a specific location. The vacant litter in the lower register (which elsewhere is seen to bear the Rayed Deity) may be another informant, perhaps to convey a certain kind of status—though it also seems to be an index (D) pointing outside the temporal moment to show how the Rayed Deity arrived or will subsequently depart, linking us to a preceding or succeeding plot-point (indexes are the most difficult function to identify in this way since knowledge of the wider story is so often necessary).

More could be said about this scene, but it is enough to show that the four-part system of functions can be plausibly applied to a Pre-Columbian narrative image even where outside knowledge of the story itself is absent. If so, what the system succeeds in describing are our intuitive responses to narrative pictures, the subliminal processes we enact in the disassembly and identification of relational units, normally performed without much conscious effort or deductive reasoning.



[72]

The close control of phase chronology has been especially helpful in charting the evolution of fineline narrative representation.⁴¹ Phases I and II provide little more than emblematic portraits of deities, animals, and a few generic scenes of sacrifice, combat, and captive-taking. Characters are identified by their physical attributes, costuming, and insignia, as well as the particular activities they engage in. Though there are clearly allusions to mythic tales, there is little in the way of discernible nuclei and thus nothing that approaches a plot.

From Phase III onwards, however, we see the emergence of complex compositions with multiple participants; as well as the recurrence of the same actors in different episodes on different vessels.⁴² Especially significant for our interests are the introduction at this point of devices dubbed “locators” and “symbols.”⁴³ Locators are informants that specify the action as taking place in mountain, desert, scrubland, ocean, or town environments. At their more iconic and naturalistic they form part of the scene’s own spatial world, but at their more conventional they float as dislocated emblems within it (Fig. 6a). Symbols constitute a further remove in supplementing the scene with data that amplifies the nature or character of activity involved. Thus hummingbirds and insects in flight appear almost exclusively in scenes of sacrifice, combat, or running, where they seem to denote the intensity of the action (Fig. 6b). As visual metaphors, with no intrinsic role in pictorial space, they are apparently informants of a purely semasiographic kind.

By Phase IV we see a greater use of the spatial dimensions offered by the “ceramic page,” and open vistas of combat, ritual performance, and hunting become more common. An accompanying innovation is the organization of scenes into registers and multiple ground lines; features that direct reading order and expand the narratives sequentially.⁴⁴ The first tentative steps toward a true cyclic type come where the same character appears twice on the same vessel, sometimes in separate nuclei. The advent of major themes, such as the “Revolt of the Objects” and the “Presentation,” brings greater interest in tackling narrative complexity, especially of shifting locality and temporality.

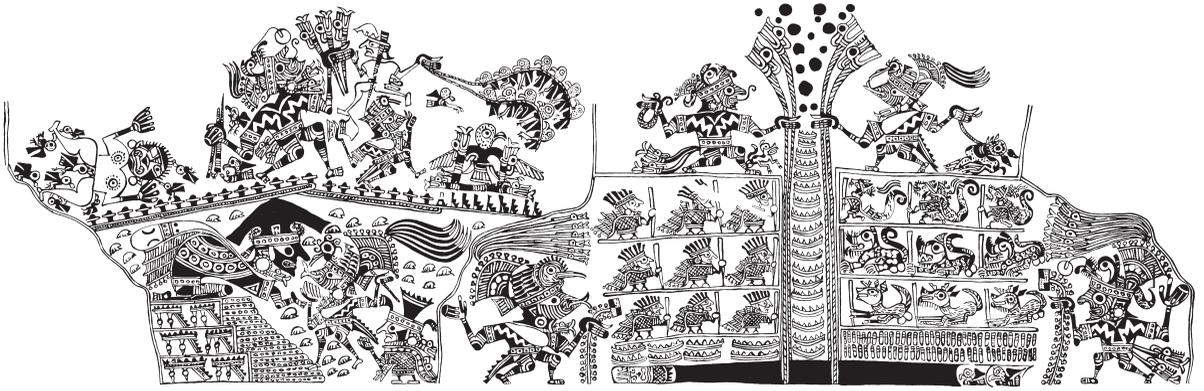
Changes to long-standing patterns are evident in the final production era of fineline work, Phase V, which was especially

41 Donnan and McClelland 1999.

42 For example, the pairing of “Wrinkle Face” and “Iguana” emerge as notable protagonists in Moche mythology, often as the sacrificers of other supernatural beings (Donnan and McClelland 1999: 182, figs. 3.22, 3.42, 4.77, 5.17, 5.22, 5.68, 6.130, 6.142, 6.143, 6.144, 6.149, 6.150, 6.151, 6.154).

43 Donnan and McClelland 1999: 59–62, 104, 105–107, 294.

44 Quilter 1997: 117; Donnan and McClelland 1999: 134.

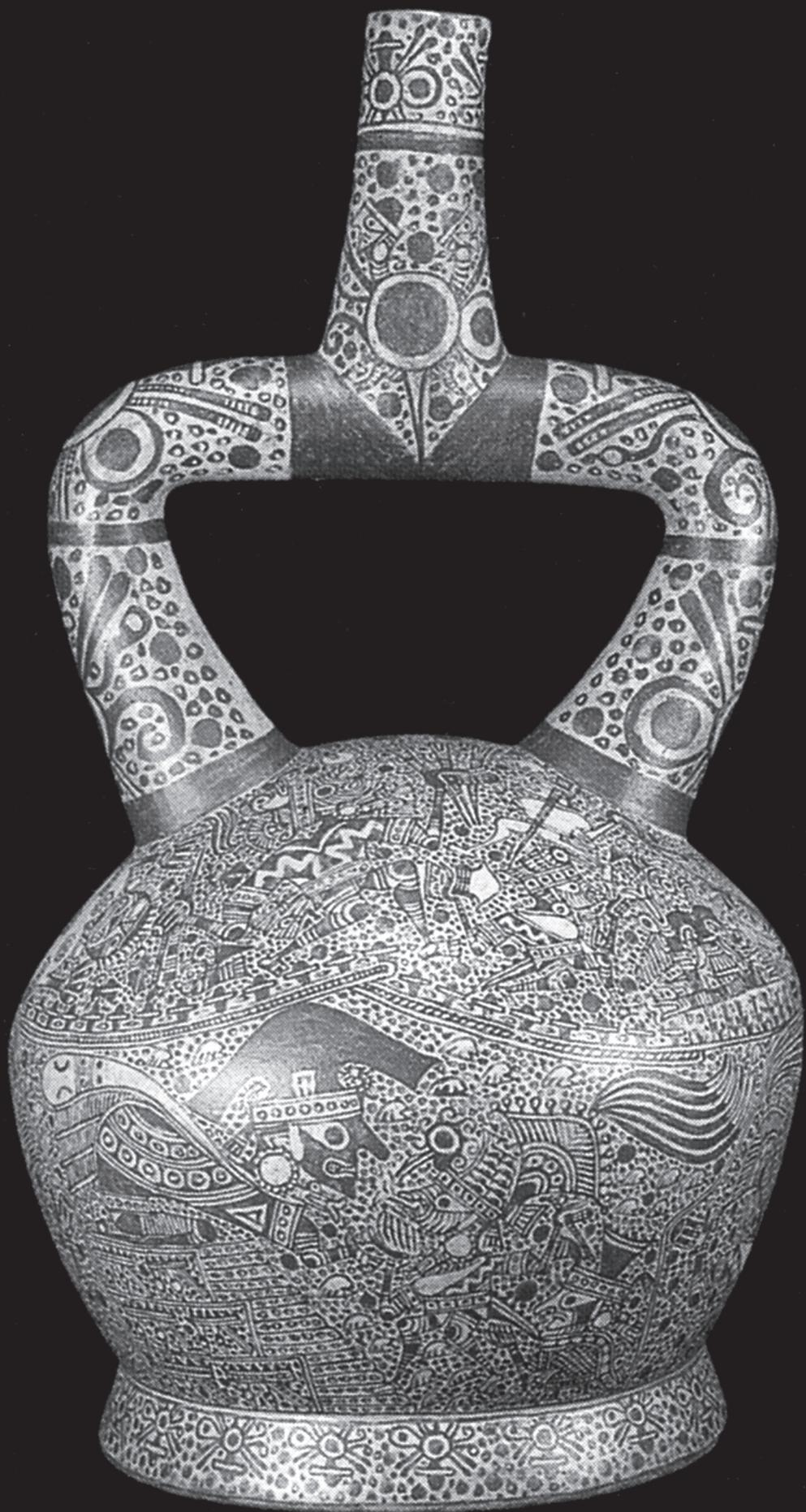


centered in the northern part of the Moche realm around the site of San José de Moro. The distinctive Moro style heralded significant developments in design and content. Compositions with multiple nuclei, particularly the great narrative expansions of the “Burial” scene, mark a real advance in complexity and sophistication (Fig. 7). Stylistically, Moro painting covers every inch of the vessel’s exterior, with any vacant background subject to “in-filling” with dots and other small motifs so as to create a dense and crowded surface—an effect not unlike a crazed glaze (Fig. 8). Achieving the very opposite of clarity and ease of reading, Phase V gives us less a story-telling page than vessels wrapped in a decorative veneer of significance.

This touches upon an important deficit in our knowledge, namely the precise function and social context of Moche fineline ceramics. Excavated whole vessels are restricted to high-status burials, giving good reason to believe that such wares were the preserve of elite society. The stirrup-spouted pots most probably held chicha, the Andean beer usually made from maize, and signs of wear suggest that they had practical use during the lives of their owners. We can take it that the allusions to myth they bore lent a symbolic importance that converted utilitarian objects to something more fitting for their usage and possession by the privileged and powerful. Much of what we call “decoration” on cultural artifacts served this important transformative role and cannot, without good reason, be dismissed as idle beautification.

In review, it is clear that Moche fineline tradition evolved over time, progressing from simple emblematic

FIG. 7 The “Burial Theme”—an example of a complex “cyclic” narrative from Phase V (for the whole vessel see Figure 8) (drawing Donna McClelland).



relationships to the textscape to others that exploited much greater sequential detail and elaboration. The interest these later phases express in story development, locality, and temporality provoked notable changes in its semiotic make-up. The fineline genre maintained its strongly iconographic approach, but introduced more semasiographic elements over time, sometimes entering the region of true overlap.

[75]

THE SEMASIOGRAPHIC MODE

In the contemporary world we are familiar with semasiography (from the Greek *semasi(a)* “meaning” + *-o* + *-graphy* “representing/writing”) in international signage systems, graphic information guides, and other forms of “universal language” that seek to impart meaning through images rather than words. While these exploit iconic relationships, semasiography also encompasses entirely conventional systems of communication and recording such as those used in mathematics, music, and dance notation, which operate within their own organizing grammars independent of language.⁴⁵

As the diagram in Figure 2 indicates, the semasiographic mode occupies something of a middle ground between images and script—one in which signs have the flavor, and some of the functions, of linguistic units without true correspondence.⁴⁶ In historical terms, narrative semasiography is rare and heavily weighted toward the iconic end of its representational spectrum, itself a broad church that admits the same range seen in the iconographic mode, from the naturalistic to the highly schematized.⁴⁷ It displays various features that distinguish it from its iconographic counterpart, though the boundary between them is not without overlap and blurring (as we have already seen). It begins to differ in two important respects: first in the growing emphasis it puts on conventional coding, and second—especially in regard to narrative—in its need

FIG. 8 Example of Phase V style from the region of San José de Moro (for the entire scene see Fig. 7) (photo courtesy of the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History).

45 Hill 1967: 94; Boone 1994a: 20–22. The Pre-Columbian Andes are well known for just such a system in the shape of the still largely enigmatic khipu code of knotted cords (Ascher and Ascher 1981). While it was plainly used for numerical accounting, early colonial sources describe it as having a narrative capacity as well (Urton 1998). The possibility exists that any such function might involve a glottographic component.

46 For discussions of semasiographic texts and their principles see Gelb 1952: 11, 24–59, 252; Hill 1967: 93–95; Sampson 1985: 29–32; Coulmas 1989: 19–23; DeFrancis 1989: 20–47; Boone 1994a: 15–17; 2000: 28–31, 64–86.

47 Hill 1967: 94.

to create a high degree of syntactical structure. The former can be seen as a response to the innate difficulties of representing concepts, abstractions, or invisible phenomena in visual form; the latter the necessity of expressing the complexity of narrative interaction, chronological progression, and cause and effect relationships.

[76]

Semasiographic narratives are also less reliant on the knowledge, or even existence, of a prior text, which is to say, on the textscape as a source and key to comprehension. Semasiography has the potential to create and record new narratives—something the iconographic mode, barring extraordinarily elaborate cyclic texts, cannot. But this ability to “notify” rather than simply “recollect” comes at a particular cost.⁴⁸ Lacking strong external referents, semasiographic texts must place most, if not all, of their informational value within their own pictorial plane: the field they present to their readers. Iconographic narratives are adept at representing the most distinctive and easily pictured elements of a story—content to leave more complex or inexpressible components to be evoked by association—but semasiographic texts must deal concretely with at least some of these issues.

Some of the better-known examples of historical semasiography come from the North American Plains. Hide-painted and ledger-book-drawn narratives exemplify the naturalistic variety.⁴⁹ Descended from Pre-Columbian precursors, they employ some extra-sensory conventions (the marked flight path of arrows and bullets for instance) but for the most part rely on a mimetic resemblance to the physical world. They are often strongly sequenced, in the cyclic style, following a time-line with implied cause and effect. Thematically, they are limited to the recounting of hunts, battles, migrations, and the like. A very different approach appears among the song texts of the Ojibwa (Chippewa), where iconic signs are mixed with symbolic ones in a decisive shift to greater conventional coding.⁵⁰ Yet there is no coherent or consistent system here, and these linear texts act solely as mnemonic devices to aid the performer’s recall of the song.

The Winter Counts of the Kiowa and Lakota (Sioux), a group of indigenous annals, is another such mnemonic tool.⁵¹ Here a pictorial emblem denotes each passing year, selected to reflect some notable event that took place in it. They accordingly lack any sequential coherence, or context within which to read them. A naked figure covered in spots conveys the idea of a “smallpox epidemic” reasonably well, but a blanket (whose rectangular rendering itself requires recognition) surrounded by radiating lines denoting people (even less recognizable) does little to explicate “received first annuities”

48 This distinction set out by Taylor (1975).

49 Mallery 1886; 1893; Blish 1967; Petersen 1971; Taylor 1975: 353–356; Young 1986.

50 Hoffman 1891; Taylor 1975: 354.

51 Mallery 1877; 1886; 1893; Blish 1967: 22–26.

without direct contact with its encoder. That each maker chose his own annual event to illustrate highlights that these are private codes of local significance only. At their most schematized and abstract, as we see in the Yukaghir picture-writing of Siberia, semasiographic texts lose tangible connection to their iconic origins and acquire so many conceptual markers that they appear as little more than visual puzzles.⁵²

What we see in this range of solutions is something of the aforementioned friction as authors struggle with the limitations of the semasiographic mode. The attempt to create discourse without explicit reference to language leads to a semantic “thinness” in which communicative ambition is stunted. To varying degrees we see contamination from glottography: either to denote what cannot be depicted (in the modern world note the ubiquitous use of “i” for “information” in otherwise iconic sign systems!) or to disambiguate two or more potential interpretations. But these and other attempts to increase information load can be achieved only by increased conventionality—with the corresponding price of a higher threshold of required learning. It seems clear that semasiography lacks the flexibility and expressive depth to be a comprehensive communication system on a par with glottography; which would explain why, in historical terms, it has found favor only in a few select contexts.⁵³

[77]

In order to explain why semasiographic representation has flourished in its specialist niches, both thematic and cultural, it is necessary to focus on what it succeeds in doing. As Elizabeth Hill Boone points out, semasiography offers not alternative but superior strategies for representing certain kinds of relational information.⁵⁴ The previously mentioned cases of mathematics, music, and choreography are all subjects dominated by internal relationships—similarities and contrasts of degree and kind—features that lend themselves to spatial representation. As in cartography, the relevant data is far better expressed in graphic rather than linguistic terms. The semasiography of modern signage systems differs in its aim to overcome barriers of language and culture, to provide ready

52 Sampson 1985: 28–29; DeFrancis 1989: 24–35; Janney and Arndt 1994: 447–448; Elkins 1999: 167–169. DeFrancis stresses that the Yukaghir texts were personal notes among intimates and never used as a system of communication independent of their authors. They were made by women, for whom social decorum denied them most other forms of emotional expression.

53 Cf. Sampson 1985: 30. Both DeFrancis (1989: 34–35) and Coe (1992: 18) inveigh against Sampson’s belief that a comprehensive semasiographic language is even theoretically possible. The case of Blissymbolics or “Semantography” is instructive here. A detailed attempt to create a universal language on semasiographic principles devised by Charles Bliss (1965), the system has found a role in the education of handicapped children who lack speech and hearing abilities, but has found no other purpose.

54 Boone 1994a: 9–10.

recognition of a limited number of directions and services. It is logical that the immediacy of iconic signs will predominate in any such attempt at “universal” communication. But it is well to remember that these systems rely to a great extent on the hidden value of “recognition” over “comprehension”—which is to say that they are only truly effective after being learnt by repeat viewing, by which time their iconic qualities have become secondary.

[78]

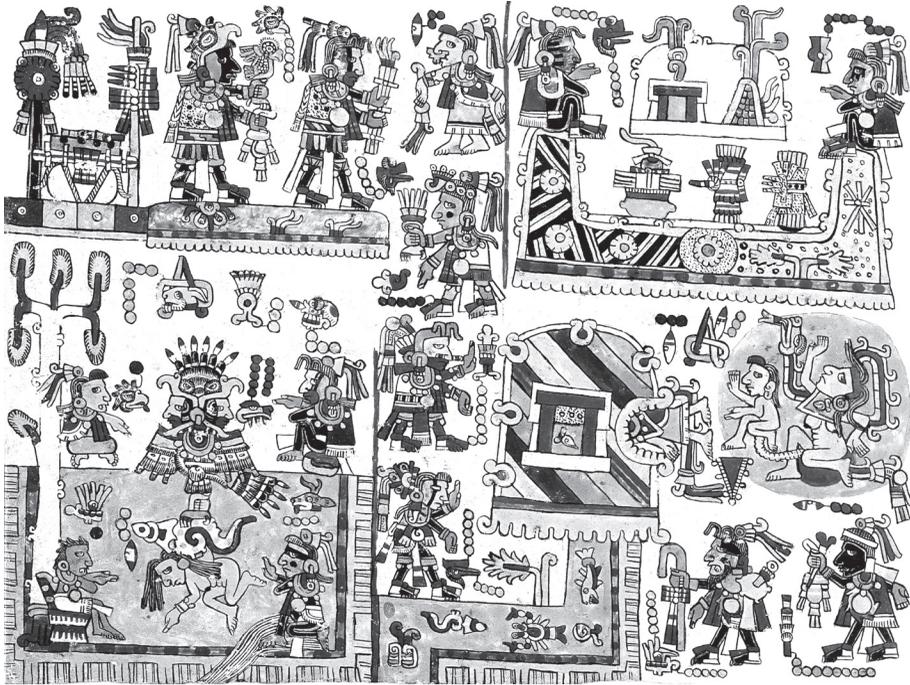
The criticisms of semasiography mentioned thus far—especially popular among students of writing—presuppose that the intended reader approached the text in much the same fashion we would today.⁵⁵ In so doing they pass over the role of an interpretive community in supplying contextual data and generating meaning within a broader cultural frame. Viewed from the perspective of glottographic writing, semasiography is indeed a system of limited descriptive and information-bearing capacity. But viewed from the cultural embeddedness in which we must appreciate the iconographic mode, semasiography shows its strengths as the solution to a number of pressing communication problems.

Mixtec Screenfold Manuscripts

We can illustrate many of these issues by turning to one of the foremost semasiographic traditions created in any place or time, namely Mexican manuscript painting. When the Spanish conquistadores arrived in central Mexico in the early sixteenth century, the dominant form of indigenous narrative and record keeping was that rendered in screenfold books made from hide, paper, and cloth. Given the perishable nature of these materials the antiquity of this tradition is hard to assess, though some of its stylistic conventions clearly have deep roots in the region. Although produced over a wide area of highland Mexico, these documents exhibit a consistent style known today as Mixteca-Puebla. Only a handful of the works currently extant are actually Pre-Columbian (almost all of these from the Mixteca region of modern Oaxaca), though a much greater number commissioned in the years shortly after the conquest gives some impression of the original scope of their genre-formats and thematic content. They include divinatory almanacs, cartographic and migratory histories, illustrated annals, and mythological and dynastic narratives (many of which incorporate lengthy genealogical lists), often covering dozens of pages.⁵⁶ The Mixtec corpus we will be concentrating on here is very largely

⁵⁵ The harshest critic of semasiographic communication is certainly DeFrancis (1989: 46–47). For a stout defense see Boone (1994a).

⁵⁶ E.g., Caso 1965; 1977–79; Smith 1973; 1983b; Glass 1975; Jansen 1988; 1990; 1992; Boone 1994b, 2000. See also Prem 1992 for a detailed survey of “narrative pictography” in Aztec manuscripts.



[79]

of this last category and describes military campaigns, political negotiations, marriages and births, pilgrimages, and other ritual expeditions—often interwoven with mythological background material.

Even the most cursory of glances at a screenfold manuscript impresses upon us that we are dealing with a form of organized discourse (Fig. 9). We can attribute this intuitive response to a number of critical features.⁵⁷ The red guidelines that divide the page into meandering registers demonstrate that we have directed reading; the disembodied motifs suggest the discreteness of formal syntax; while the marked conventionality of many signs hints at linguistic relationships. The Mixteca-Puebla style presents a unified canon: combining figural, architectural, and topographic depiction with a range of notational devices; executed in a rich palette of colors and defined by an almost mechanical black outline.

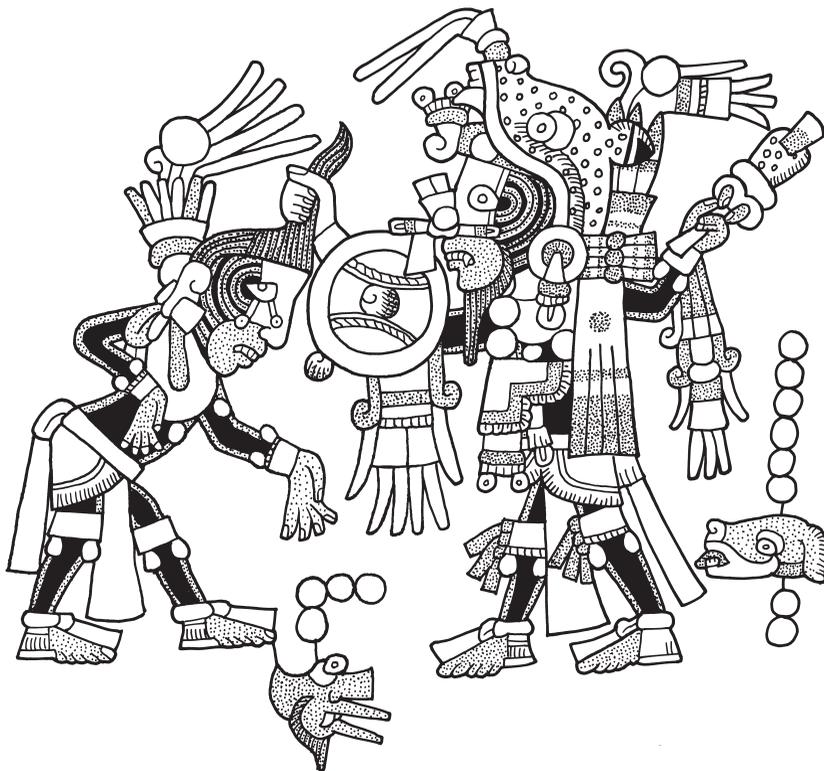
The rendering of figures is standardized and their significance as narrative nuclei denoted by a limited range of body postures, hand gestures, and manipulations of significant objects.⁵⁸ Some of the more frequent depict

FIG. 9 Mixtec manuscript painting, Codex Zouche-Nuttall, page 16 (photo courtesy of the British Museum).

⁵⁷ For an art-historical approach to this same issue see Elkins 1998: 135–156.

⁵⁸ Troike 1982.

[80]



victors grasping the hair of their captives, facing figures displaying contrasting gestures of instruction and compliance, and similar male-female pairs holding drinking cups to indicate marriage (Fig. 10a–c). These depictions resemble those in the more elaborate late Moche narratives, but here they have acquired a different kind of semantic role. Instead of portraying an event, these figures begin to function like independent verbs in a statement.⁵⁹ The same analogy arises in George Kubler’s work on the murals of Teotihuacan, where semasiographic texts once again provoke linguistic parallels.⁶⁰

As with Moche fineline painting, any number of scenes in Mixtec manuscripts can be analyzed to reveal their narrative functions (Fig. 11). In so doing the restricted range of nuclei quickly becomes apparent and this, together with the general scarcity of catalysts to “fill out” the narratives, inevitably leads to terse texts lacking much in the way of rhetorical color. The concentration on genealogical data points to the importance of bloodlines in securing legitimacy among the Mixtec elite. But the narrative focus, despite their tales of heroes and heroines and the crowds of actors that swarm across

59 King 1994; Monaghan 1994.

60 Kubler 1967: 5.

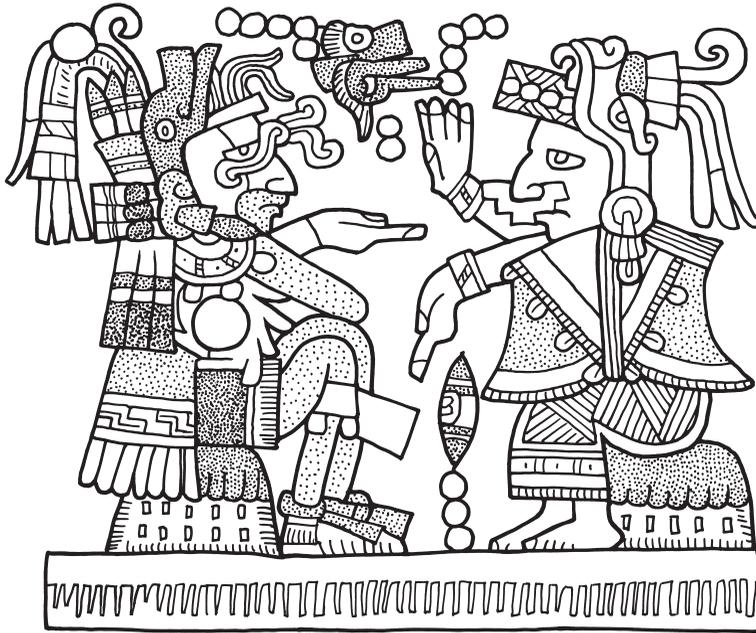
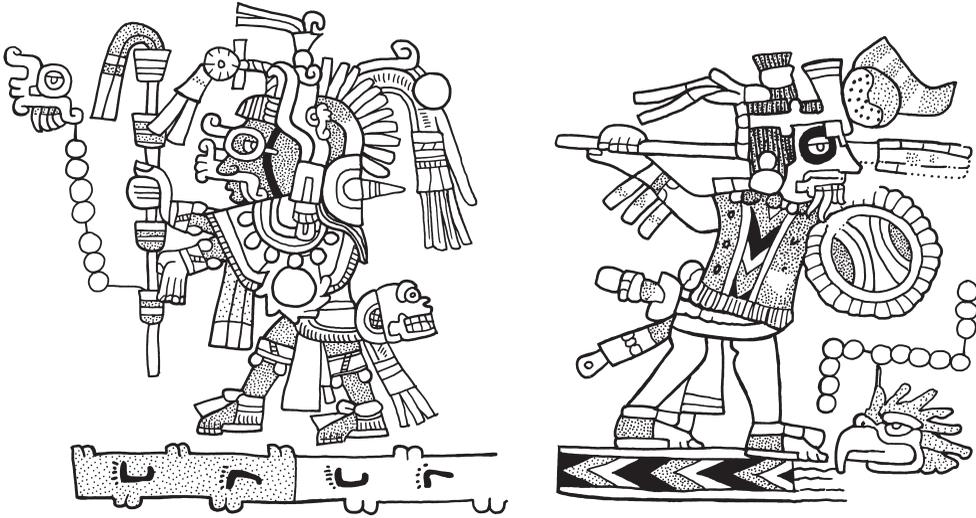


FIG. 10 A-C Common narrative nuclei in Mixtec manuscripts (all subsequent drawings by the author unless otherwise stated) (opposite) Captive-taking (above, top) Negotiation (instruction-acceptance) (above, below) Marriage.

[82]



FIG. 11 Scene from a Mixtec manuscript with a preliminary assignment of narrative functions. Codex Zouche-Nuttall, page 44.



[83]

their pages, lies as much in places as people. Various types of locative informant—none more prevalent than the sign for “hill”—are qualified by a range of iconic and conventional cues. At times we see pages open out into great topographic vistas, part map, part text, where the strength and economy of the semasiographic route are truly felt.⁶¹ This emphasis is explicable when we consider the practical concerns of communities living in mountainous terrain with limited cultivatable land and access to water.⁶² The heroic deeds of rulers and their dynasties have as constant sub-texts the acquisition and political control of these scant resources.

We might briefly survey the diverse strategies with which the Mixteca-Puebla tradition sets about its sign-making. In one common device iconic footprints serve to represent a journey over land, a motif that had endured unchanged since the glories of Teotihuacan mural painting perhaps 1,000 years earlier. A chevron-marked ground-line denotes a “war path,” a wholly conventional sign (Fig. 12).⁶³ A scroll that issues from the speaker’s mouth indicates speech: among the Mixtec it is occasionally specified as “harsh” or “insulting” by attached icons of flint or stone, or as “poetic” or “soft” by feathery down (Fig. 13a, b).⁶⁴ Other than the fact that something relevant to the plot has been said, these markings leave the specifics

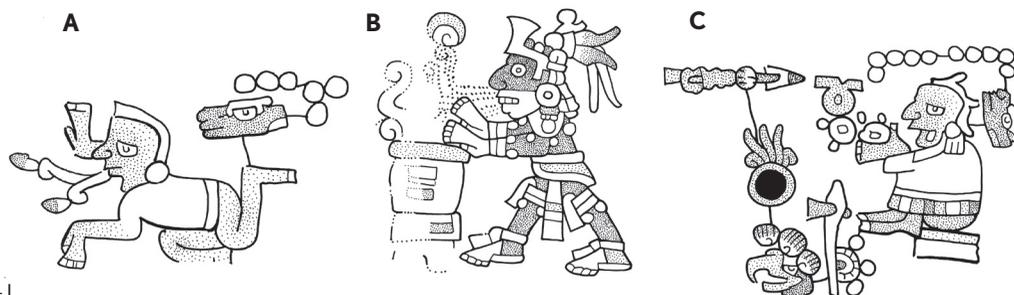
FIG. 12 A-B Types of journey represented in Mixtec manuscripts: (left) Footprints on a path used to indicate pilgrimages and similar treks (right) Chevron-marked pathway that denotes military expeditions.

61 For key work on Mixtec toponyms see Caso 1949; Smith 1973; 1983a; Byland and Pohl 1994.

62 Pohl and Byland 1990.

63 Caso 1950: 14; Smith 1973: 33.

64 Spinden 1935: 435; Smith 1973: 34; 1983b: 242–243; Houston and Taube 2000.



[84]

FIG. 13 Representations of speech in Mixtec manuscripts: (a) “Flinty” (harsh, aggressive) speech (b) “Downy” (soft, poetic) speech (c) “Fighting Talk.”

unstated and their contribution can only be judged by an appreciation of their consequences. In a few instances we are given a string of signs that represent the content of speech; as where the joined emblems of an axe, dart, eagle down, and bloody mirror denote “fighting talk” (Fig. 13c).⁶⁵ As nouns, they would clearly have available sound values, but in this case their use is purely semantic, and not so very different from the nonspoken lists of conjoined objects that appear elsewhere as descriptions of gifts and tribute items.

The screenfolds abound with calendrical notations, the Mixtec version of the pan-Mesoamerican 260-day ritual cycle. Coefficients are rendered in chains of colored dots, while month names are for the most part pictographs of recognizable animals, birds, and plants—though where necessary non-iconic symbols were employed (as in *qhi* “Movement”) (Fig. 14a). Links to the corresponding 365-day year are marked by the distinctive “A-O” motif (Fig. 14b). Dates are ascribed to every nucleus, which is thus embedded in a firm time order—facilitating flashbacks and other temporal convolutions. The introduction of notational chronology here marks a real revolution in addressing the issue of narrative time, a feature that further distances semasiographic from iconographic representation.

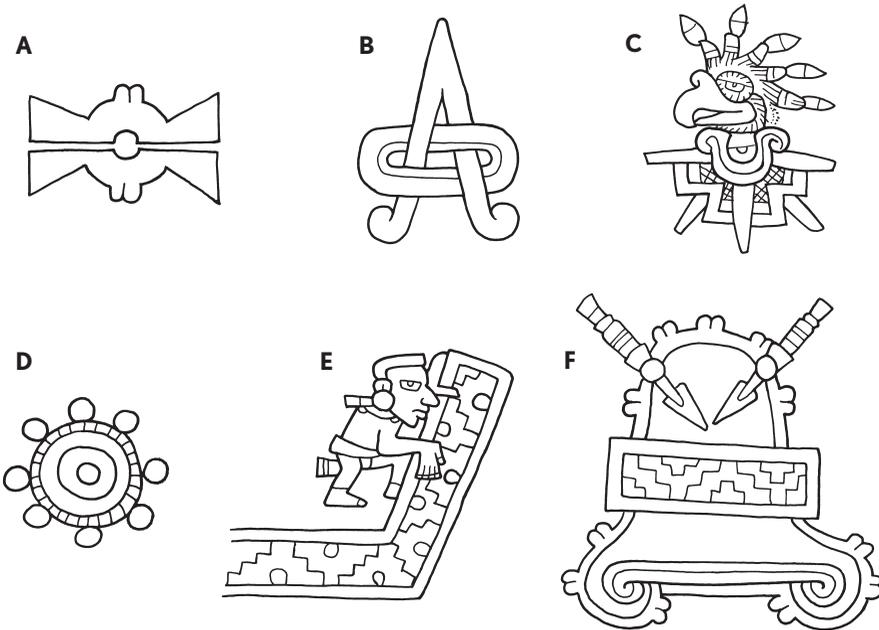
Day signs and their coefficients serve a second and equally prominent role in the manuscripts, since, like several other Mexican cultures, the Mixtec used birth-dates as names for both historical individuals and deities. Both nominal and calendrical usages involve glottographic values in the sense that they refer to sounded words in the Mixtec or ñuiñe language—even if they remain “open” in the sense that they had alternative readings among other language groups using the same

65 Boone 1994b: 55

system.⁶⁶ Glottographic marking is also evident in the “personal names” that often join calendrical ones. These are drawn from a wide variety of mixed pictorial or symbolic signs for deities, animals, natural phenomena, and sundry objects precious, prestigious, or beautiful (Fig. 14c). A number have been assigned their original *ñuiñe* values, though their place within a multilingual pan-Mexican environment ensures that they remain glottographically flexible.

A more telling role for glottography comes in the spelling of place names, the signs attached to one of the toponymic symbols. The iconic sign for *yucu yusi* “turquoise jewel” is employed elsewhere as *ñuu* “blue” (Fig. 14d)⁶⁷—displaying the same kind of semantic development we find in fully hieroglyphic systems. The tonal qualities of *ñuiñe* provide a rich source for rebus and punning. Among a number of well-known examples is where *ca’nu* “great” in the place-name of *chiyo ca’nu* “Great Foundation” is represented by the act of bending a temple platform, an allusion to the close tonal homonym *canu* “to double” (Fig. 14e).⁶⁸ Another tie to language is said to come in the common pictorial convention

FIG. 14 Mixtec signs with varied relationships to language: (a) “Movement” (*qhi*) day sign (b) The “A-O” year motif (c) Personal name (“Flinty-Eagle-Star”) (d) “Turquoise Jewel/Blue” (*yucu yusi/ñuu*) (e) “Great Foundation” (*chiyo ca’nu*) (f) The “conquest” sign of darts piercing a toponym-identified hill.



66 See Houston 1994a for discussion of “open” as opposed to “closed” writing systems.

67 Smith 1973: 61–62; 1983b: 240–241.

68 Caso 1949: 153–155; Smith 1973: 57–58; Boone 2000: 36.

in which darts pierce place-signs to mark their defeat (Fig. 14f). A Spanish-Mixtec dictionary entry for “conquistar” reads *chibi nduvua ñuhu ñaha* “to put an arrow in the lands of another,” which has been taken to reflect the existence of a verbal metaphor that affected screenfold representation.⁶⁹ Yet we might equally be seeing reflexivity at work here, where knowledge of a semasiographic image has fed back into the spoken lexicon, and at the very least we should consider them co-dependent signs.

[86]

The burden of identity, which for the iconographic mode rests on pictured attributes, is in these ways removed from figural depictions and instead tethered to them as disembodied notations. Thus freed, the figures lose their specificity, displaying an ad-hoc, drifting relationship to their identities, with diagnostic costuming and insignia appearing and disappearing either without cause or to permit additional layers of semantic coding (some parts of which may as yet be unappreciated). Where the context is clear, figures can be deleted altogether and names alone serve to denote a person’s involvement in an action or relationship. A fascinating detail from a genealogical tally at the end of the Codex Vindobonensis reverso comes where the scribe, seemingly hurried, gives up painting the formulaic figure and name combinations and completes the list with a series of isolated names lacking any syntax outside their continuity with what precedes them.⁷⁰ Such cases invert our expectation that names serve to caption and identify figural depictions. Instead, figures act more like determinatives (in the Egyptological sense) to define broad categories of “lord,” “lady,” “priest,” “deity,” “captive,” and so on, and serve to specify nominals that are otherwise sexually nondescript and status free. This point cannot be taken too far, but it does highlight that we are talking about synergies of representational code here rather than simple hierarchies, and stresses how far we have traveled from even schematic reductions of the visible world toward the essence of script.

A number of scholars have commented on the advantages of the multi-ethnic Mixteca-Puebla tradition in its highland environment. The ability of its texts to convey narrative sense without recourse to language offers itself to the widest range of literates, of importance in a zone of close cultural and economic interaction always deeply riven by linguistic barriers. In this way semasiography filled a niche in the communications marketplace, one useful enough to endure for a millennia or more in preference to the glottographic systems used by neighboring societies.

69 Smith 1983b: 244–245.

70 Caso 1950: 39–40; Troike 1990: 79.

The Mixtec screenfolds plainly served a range of purposes. They directly addressed Mixtec elite identity, providing key records of genealogy, ancestral achievement, and claims to territorial dominion. Their later use as legal documents, as titles to land and water rights in colonial times, doubtless reflects continuity with long-held ideas of texts as symbols of legitimacy and power.⁷¹ There is some evidence for the physical use of the screenfolds in display (hung around the walls of elite residences), while other sources strongly suggest their role both as “songbooks” and scripts for dramatic performance.⁷² This pointedly raises the issue of exactly who read and used the texts. In the case of the better-known Aztec we know that there were separate roles of scribe and interpreter (though sometimes combined in the same person). In the hands of a specialist interpreter the limitations of literal semasiography would fall away. The screenfolds now switch their role to become unusually detailed mnemonic devices, the basis for elaborated texts in which the reader/performer would draw deeply from the wider textscape.⁷³ There has been some success in modern attempts to rebuild their story sense: producing workable paraphrases of their plot lines, not to mention fixing them in an archaeological and ethnographical context.⁷⁴ But semasiographic representation is only “half the story”—at most—and the full richness of its original explications will always elude us.

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This survey of some of the more notable semiotic structures in Mixtec manuscripts highlights their richly collaborative nature, their thorough mixing of representational strategies. An essentially semasiographic system here obscures a deep penetration by glottographic components—which were plainly introduced to resolve ambiguity and expand semantic potential wherever possible. The texts could be directed at different levels of literacy: accessible to a pan-regional, multi-ethnic community, but providing richer data to its local one. Although we can reconstruct their general sense today, there can be little question that their readers contributed a significant part of their meaning, which are as much invitations to create texts as they are literally set down on the pages themselves.

71 E.g., Pohl 1994.

72 King n.d.: 57–60, 1990; Byland and Pohl 1994: 9; Monaghan 1990; 1994.

73 Jansen 1988: 89.

74 Following seminal advances by Caso (1949) and Smith (1973) in identifying Mixtec geography in the manuscripts, Byland and Pohl (1994) have conducted the most productive conjunction of archaeological and ethnographic survey.

THE GLOTTOGRAPHIC MODE

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A direct correspondence between graphic marks and language constitutes the glottographic mode and the realm of script. Whether it organizes its signs by phonemes (units of sound), morphemes (units of grammatical meaning), or lexemes (individual words)—in practice, varied combinations of them—glottography establishes explicit relationships between the visual and verbal and imitates the syntax and grammar of speech.⁷⁵ This said, any idea that this connection is in some way direct or unproblematic has long since been replaced by the realization that writing produces unique forms of discourse. Glottography may be inspired by speech, but its translation into an imagistic form involves some compromise and much creative energy. Its texts are highly discrete and unfailingly composed of signs that gain their full sense only when organized into syntactical patterns. Thus individual words have only a limited message-making capacity, it is their combination into an incalculable number of potential texts that gives glottography its immense expressive range. It is tempting to say that glottography is constrained only by the capabilities of language itself, but historical writing systems consistently fail to represent all parts of speech and certain areas of great semantic importance, tonal qualities and stress for example, are regularly ignored.⁷⁶

By its very nature glottography marks a decisive step away from iconicity: from signification by resemblance toward that fixed by convention. As a mirror of language, writing reflects the fundamentally arbitrary nature of sound-sign relationships. To do this it must forge innovative relationships between appearance and sense: imposing significance on a selection of appropriated or invented motifs that require active learning. This is not to say that writing systems abandon all ties to iconicity; to one degree or another they remain part of the art system that gave them birth and subject to its pervading aesthetic. But even at their most outwardly pictorial, as in classically “hieroglyphic” systems of Egyptian, Luvian, or Maya, a crucial new linkage is at work. This is best seen in the rebus principle. Here a pictograph denoting one word is used in place of another with which it shares the same or similar sound. Rebus plays a key role in the early development of scripts worldwide and is a clear marker of glottographic function—depending, as it does, entirely on sound value and the conversion of icons into conventional signs.⁷⁷ At the same time, few writing systems are free of semasiographic components: either because the translation

75 Gelb 1952; Sampson 1985; Coulmas 1989; DeFrancis 1989; Houston 2004a.

76 Sampson 1985: 37–38.

77 DeFrancis 1989: 50; Robertson 2004.

into visual form requires features of sense-making poorly served by purely phonic means, or because forms of notation are simply more efficient. In modern alphabets these include grammatical notation, special characters of variable meaning, and the familiar inventory of numerical and mathematical signs, most of which are similarly found in ancient scripts.

The mechanics of writing systems, as studied in grammatology, have received detailed treatment elsewhere and we need not explore them in greater depth here. Instead, we might keep our focus where it properly belongs on the application of glottography as a narrative mode. The development of writing achieved a number of important semiotic innovations. It could be used as more-or-less direct records of a single person's expression in speech, which could be preserved over many generations or travel great distances. It allowed the spoken word to find a whole new symbolic presence as the written word—an additional level of signification very often of prestige and authority. As a narrative device, glottography is as at home making new contributions to the textscape as it is in reproducing and modifying existing portions, and acts as a means to fix and crystallize texts previously held in the less tangible form of orality.

Any sense that the recovery of lost sign-to-sound relationships themselves offers direct access to meaning is illusory of course. Word retrieval, like the recognition of any individual image or motif, is only the point of entry to further layers of signification, whose mining requires multi-disciplinary approaches. Writing specialists tend to place great emphasis on the autonomy of written texts: their ability to convey their entire content to a reader distant from the author in space or time. Strategies that do not meet this criterion are apt to be called “deficient” or “partial”—judgments that are often allied to notions of alphabetic supremacy and the intellectual paragon of the Classical tradition. What this focus on the mechanics of glottography routinely overlooks is the cultural knowledge required to comprehend and contextualize any text.⁷⁸ No matter how transparent their linguistic values, every one requires external frames of reference and a socio-cultural matrix in which to situate it. Stephen Houston makes the point well:

Often, recorded texts serve as points of departure for performances or further elaborations of their message. They do not stand alone, but, rather, must be read by someone with a comprehension of the context and broader meaning, by someone who will take cues from the script. (1994b: 30)

⁷⁸ Hill 1967: 95

Maya Hieroglyphic Writing

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If the interpretative challenges we face in the New World stem in significant measure from the loss of the indigenous word, then any contact with its spoken past must be prized indeed. Hieroglyphic writing presents the modern researcher with an unparalleled opportunity to retrieve language in its original system of record. Full glottography was a relatively isolated development in geographic terms, restricted to the Mesoamerican cultural zone, and even here developed principally only in the Maya, Zapotec, and Isthmian traditions. It took root during the first millennium BC, though precisely where and among whom is uncertain, and it may never be possible to isolate a single source or develop a “family tree” of scripts of the kind commonly assembled for the Old World.⁷⁹ What we can be confident of is that writing in the Americas, as elsewhere, grew out of existing art traditions—though whether the spur came from calendrical notation, the drive to record the identities of humans and gods, economic accounts, or some other imperative, remains unclear.⁸⁰



FIG. 15 Maya hieroglyphic inscription on a public monument. Copan Stela P (photo by the author).

The most numerous, closely studied, and best understood corpus of hieroglyphic texts belongs to the Maya, who produced the great bulk of their surviving inscriptions during the period AD 250–900 (Fig. 15). The Maya system, whose decipherment has seen rapid advances in recent decades, is a mixed logosyllabic one: combining signs for pure vowels, syllables, and whole words. Today there is a good working knowledge of its spelling principles, with a sizable lexicon now in place and ongoing progress in recovering the details of its phonology.⁸¹ Decipherment has produced a wealth of new data about Maya society and its worldview, uncovering areas of intellectual activity and historical incident that would never otherwise form traces in the archaeological record.

79 There is reason to suspect that Olmec culture was a progenitor in this regard, not least since some of the earliest signs of potential writing appear in the headgear of Olmec monumental heads. Here motifs including jaguar paws, macaw heads, and bird talons, plausibly denote the personal names of those depicted (Coe 1977: 186; Grove 1981: 65–67).

80 See Prem 1971; 1973; Coe 1976; Marcus 1976; Justeson 1986; Justeson and Mathews 1990; Houston 2004; n.d.

81 E.g., Houston, Stuart, and Robertson 1998; Wichmann 2004.



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Although many Maya monuments are all-glyphic, and therefore invested with the full burden of narrative, we cannot pass over the fact that the majority of inscriptions appear in conjunction with portraits or more complex pictorial scenes (Fig. 16). It was the joining of these two expressive devices that gave many Maya records their full communicative power—an interplay that has been called “resonance” to capture the sense of one mode still reverberating while we register the other.⁸² This combination conforms to what we earlier termed a strategy—even though the iconographic component rarely carries much narrative weight on monuments, usually offering no more than an impassive portrait frozen in the midst of ritual performance.

FIG. 16 The combination of text and image on a Maya monument. Palenque Tablet of the Slaves (drawing Linda Schele).

⁸² Miller and Houston 1987: 51. Berlo (1983) had previously dubbed this union “conjoined text.”

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This leads us to another point. In the rush to acclaim the decipherment of their historical content, we need to keep in mind that the self-declared purpose of the carvings was, by and large, to commemorate calendrical anniversaries and their appropriate rituals. With the starry-eyed idealists who made their Maya a time-worshipping theocracy now long gone, we should again appreciate that Maya monuments are symphonies to time's passage—the 20-year K'atun periods playing metronome to a civilization. Monumental discourse is filled with a seemingly redundant tracking of day counts from one event to another; betraying, as with Mixtec screenfolds, a concern with temporal exactitude. Historical events are seldom the true focus, but instead, in annals-style, work to illuminate the fortunes of recently completed time periods.

The expanded semantic range of glottography is immediately apparent in the quantity of verbs used in Maya writing—almost 100 different roots are represented in the corpus—far outstripping the descriptive potential of Mixtec semasiography. The relationship between the inscriptions and Mayan language is strong at the morphological and syntactical level, but weaker in the realms of rhetoric and discursive style. This is not to deny important work that has established the links between writing and its oral counterparts.⁸³ But it does mean that the inscriptions, like all glottographic writing, are a discourse of their own making.

One might expect that the literary origins of our four narrative functions would make them particularly productive in Maya texts. And they are, as long as we appreciate that the structure of the inscriptions—their clipped statements separated by intervening dates and day counts—broadly equates to the discrete scenes in Mixtec manuscripts. Only in especially long inscriptions, always rare, do we see glimpses of more complex literary structure. Thus a telling feature of Maya monumental glyphic discourse is its particular “thinness.”⁸⁴ Having the full range of language at their disposal—with every opportunity to add not only any amount of contextual information, but literary embellishment and adjectival color—Maya inscriptions unerringly provide descriptions of a bare and formulaic kind. To illustrate this we need only make a comparison between the Maya and Mixtec, in this case, records of prisoner-taking (Figs. 17 and 10a). Both convey much the same kind and quantity of information. As a semasiographic system, the Mixteca-Puebla tradition approaches the maximum potential of its communicative freight. Maya glottography, by contrast, displays

83 E.g., Josserand 1991; 1997; Bricker 1997; Maxwell 1997.

84 See also Miller 1983: 43.

<p>chu-ka-ja <i>chuhkaj</i></p>		<p>“is seized”</p>	<p>N1</p>
<p>[JOL?]mo? ?</p>		<p>Jeweled Skull</p>	<p>N1/F</p>
<p>U-ba-ki <i>ubaak</i></p>		<p>“(he is) the captive of”</p>	<p>C/D</p>
<p>ya-?-BAHLAM <i>?bahlam</i></p>		<p>Bird Jaguar</p>	<p>C/F</p>
<p>U-CHA'AN?AJ-u-ku <i>ucha'an?ajuk</i></p>		<p>“the master? of AjUK”</p>	<p>F/D</p>

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close to its minimal load: seldom illuminating any event with more than the date, action, and named participants. The statement “x is seized, he is the captive of y” conveys the essential details of the conflict, but its place within a proper political context—the train of causation and consequence—is entirely absent. Exceptions, where we are given a casus belli or outcome, only serve to highlight the narrative vacuum that is the rule.

From its ubiquity it is clear that this textual thinness stems not from any practical constraint but constitutes a particular approach to monumental discourse and reflects a certain “decorum.”⁸⁵ The net effect is a text punctuated by emblematic events whose wider relevance cannot be read as they are, but only in reference to external, unstated understandings. There are strong precedents elsewhere for the deliberate use of a terse, laconic style of writing, especially in public contexts.⁸⁶ This descriptive minimalism evokes an emphatic world of certainties, needless of explanation or elaboration, well suited to notions of reified and unchallengeable authority.⁸⁷

FIG. 17 Maya text recording a capture—analyzed as to its transcription, transliteration, translation, and narrative functions. Detail from Yaxchilan Lintel 41, C1–5 [additional titles for the captor follow] (drawing Ian Graham).

⁸⁵ Baines 1989.

⁸⁶ Weinold 1994; Van der Mierop 1999.

⁸⁷ There are exceptions, the lyrical Sanskrit of Khmer-language texts for one, but the dominant pattern in monumental texts is a laconic one.

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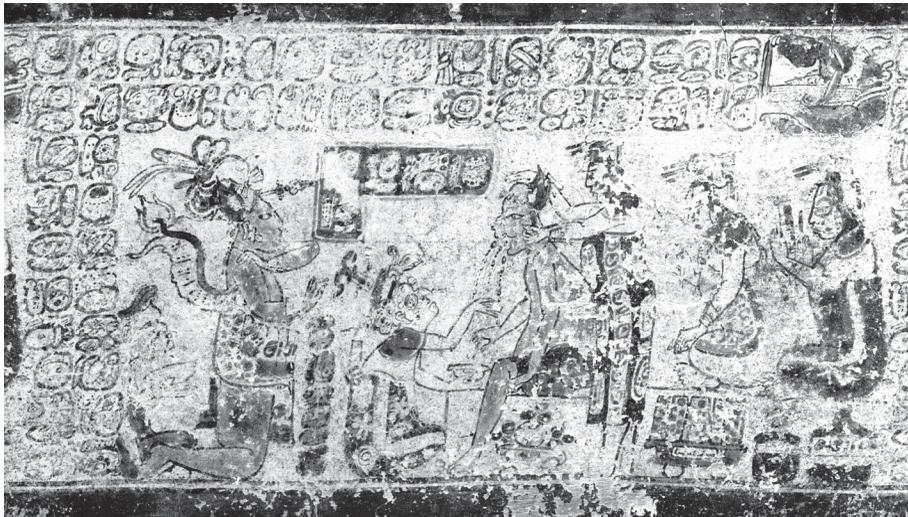


FIG. 18 A cylindrical vessel whose painted text displays an unusually “thick” glyphic discourse. K6020 (rollout photo © Justin Kerr).

On a cross-cultural basis we are used to the idea that texts set in inaccessible locations or actively obscured (such as their burial in building foundations) retain an active function even though it is one divorced from actual reading. Some of these texts are directed to the sight of supernatural entities, others intended for generations far in the future, still others achieve value from the act of their making or the mere knowledge of their existence. Some Maya inscriptions display these same features—more than one run along the top edges of tall monuments where no human eye could appreciate them.⁸⁸ Where texts were set in clear public view, there is an assumption that their primary function was to be widely read. But their parsimonious provision of content, which would (save for an especially ill-informed visitor) fail to spur much in the way of reader interest, suggests that their highest worth lay outside their direct informational value. Broad assumptions we have about monument-making as the projection of kingly authority in this way seems amply reflected in the nature of the texts themselves.

Yet, do monumental inscriptions provide a reliable guide to the nature of all Maya written texts—especially those painted in the once-legion barkpaper codices? Colonial descriptions of Postclassic books offer no real clues here, but the examples that escaped the Spanish bonfires contrast a typically thin style in the Dresden

⁸⁸ Houston 1994b: 37.

and Madrid codices with a denser-looking (though not necessarily richer) one in the Paris. Some texts on ceramics, especially those in first-person speech, lack the clear clause boundaries and terse phrasing we are so used to seeing on the monuments. They hint that “thicker” texts—whether more closely reflecting oral style or simply a richer literary form—may once have existed in other media. The “vomit pot” (Fig. 18) is one such example, bearing a mythic scene of emesis surrounded by a troublesome, apparently spoken text. While clearly literate (not the mishmash of pseudo-glyphs that appear on many vessels) its unusual formations currently resist easy reading.

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CONCLUSION

To briefly summarize the points discussed in this essay, our attempts to bridge the gulf that separates us from Pre-Columbian mentalities relies on the extent to which we can identify and reanimate their traces. Of these, deliberate sense-making, such as that found in art, writing, and other graphic notations, hold particular value. Parallel desires to notify and proclaim, and to store, preserve, and recollect have driven the human species to turn mark-marking into a series of rule-bound systems, each of which is open to subsequent description and analysis. Semiotic analysis is well suited to this task—especially to comparative discussions of the kind we have here—given its avowed aim to penetrate layers of outward cultural distinction in search of underlying, cross-cultural principles.

The human proclivity for story telling has inevitably made narrative one of the topics to be rendered in visible and durable form. Our long-term prospects for interpretation depend on both an empathetic response and the extent to which we can understand systems of coding within their cultural context. For the purposes of this paper, the term *textscape* has been a useful rubric standing for the totality of texts held and used by a particular culture. It encompasses not only the input and sources for narrative representation, but also the ongoing interactions that take place between representations themselves.

Every sign system relies on the existence of an interpretative community that can apply wider cultural sense to the texts they encounter. Modes of representation can in this way be defined as much by what is required of participant readers—what we bring to texts—as what they themselves are capable of expressing. The pictorialism of the iconographic mode means that the entry-level of its code is low and open to a wide readership. Our ability to comprehend its texts, however, depends almost entirely on prior

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possession of the plot: a feature that acculturated readers draw from their collective textscape. In the glottographic mode, we see a different emphasis. The conventionality of its code presents a high threshold of literacy, but its content need have no existing precedent in the textscape. Semasiography exploits opportunities that fall between these poles, blending the differing advantages of iconic and conventional signs: by turn inviting literal reading and then a collaborative creation of its text through memory and extrapolation. In this way at least, semasiography can be seen as more of a strategy rather than a mode on a par with iconography and glottography.

What has been attempted here is a structural approach to Pre-Columbian narrative strategies, examining their formulation and realization across a range of modes and material forms. But in so doing it has become difficult, if not impossible, to avoid questions of use and reception—given that these are intrinsic to communicative artifacts as they were originally conceived. This requires us to question the role and value of even the most articulated narratives we have discussed. If the primary objective of Moche fineline painting was to “decorate”; if Mixtec manuscripts were only used by specialist interpreters whose readings were essentially mnemonic; if Maya inscriptions were to gain at least part of their significance from “being” rather than being read—all of which seem not improbable—then narrative form is never unmediated by its immediate context and even a targeted analysis of its structure can never be divorced from socio-cultural considerations.

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