Glyph Dwellers

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Isthmian Script: Internal Variation in Two Dated Texts

Martha J. Macri

Professor Emerita, Department of Native American Studies

University of California, Davis

The origins of the ancient Mesoamerican scripts and their interrelationships remain topics of conjecture. Our knowledge of the relative time spans of these scripts and their geographic ranges is based on our knowledge of only a fraction of the texts that once existed. In spite of this limitation, it is possible, in at least one case, to find information within the texts themselves that provides some insight into the date of origin. This note looks at differences between the Isthmian texts of La Mojarra Stela 1 and the Tuxtla Statuette, two objects with clear long count dates, in order to suggest that the origin of the script must be significantly earlier than either of these texts (for images of these texts see George Stuart's drawings in Winfield Capitaine 1988).

It is generally accepted that the dates on La Mojarra Stela 1 and the Tuxtla Statuette fell close to the time of their carving. The two texts contain long count dates that are only six years apart. The long count 8.5.16.9.7 (156 CE), is the later of two long count dates on La Mojarra Stela 1, and 8.6.2.4.17 (162 CE) is on the front of the Tuxtla Statuette. Differences between them provide evidence of the existence of two script varieties, showing that the script's origin predates these two examples by decades, if not centuries. That is, by the time of the mid-second century CE, the script had already been in use long enough for local variations to have developed.

Insignificant differences include dots instead of "u" shapes on MS20, the "ending" sign (see Macri 2017a:fig. 1), and the absence of circles/dots or other changes seen in MS42, 45, 60, 65, 143, 164, 165 and 171. Most of these differences are likely due simply to the smaller size of the signs on the Tuxtla Statuette (**Fig. 1**).

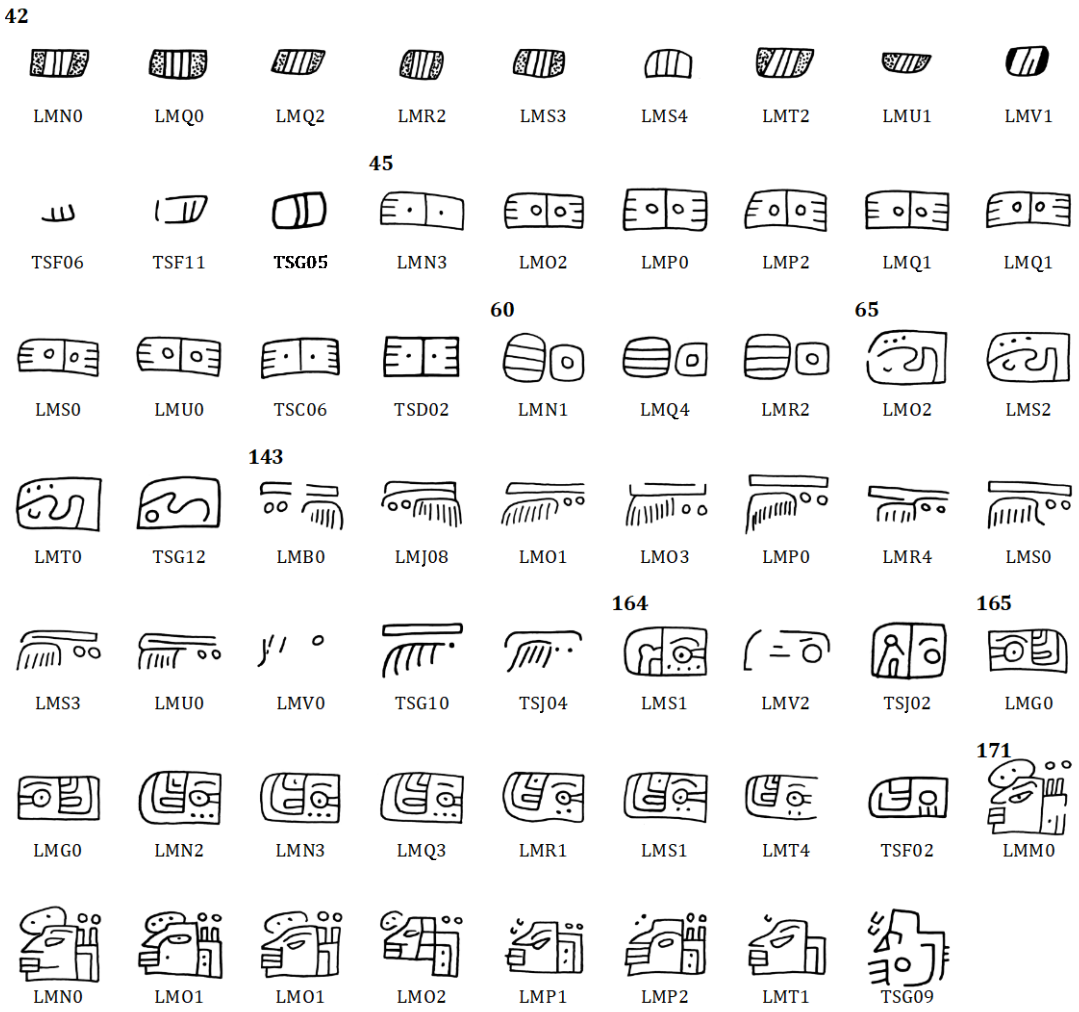

Fig. 1. Signs with minor differences in the La Mojarra (LM) and Tuxtla (TS) texts.

More important variations between the two include: the scroll of the long count introductory sign; differences in the base sign of the long count introductory glyphs that corresponds to the **HAB'** or "year" sign in Classic Maya texts; and variation between MS34 and MS35—if, in fact they are the same grapheme (**Fig. 2**).

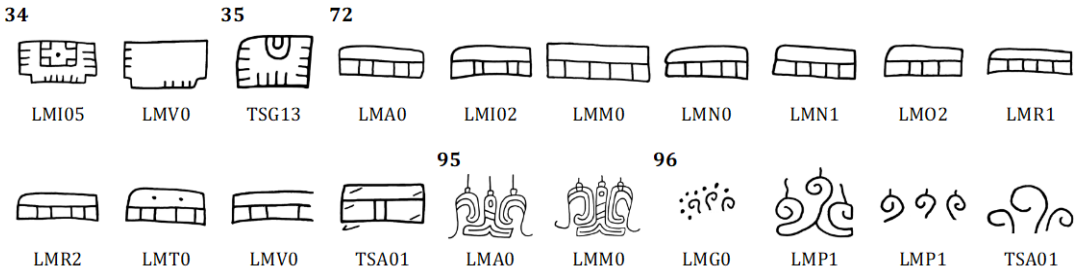

Fig. 2. Signs with significant differences in the La Mojarra (LM) and Tuxtla (TS) texts.

By far the most significant difference, however, is the correspondence of MS38 (a rectangular sign with a horizontal line and three vertical lines), the second most common sign on the La Mojarra stela, after MS20, the "ending sign", with MS39 (a rectangular sign with a circle followed by three curved lines) on the Tuxtla Statuette and the Feldspar Mask (**Fig. 3**) (Macri 2017b:5–6). Identification of the two as variants is further supported by their contexts; for example, both occur repeatedly immediately following the "ending sign," MS20 (Macri 2017a), and both occur in equivalent contexts (see Macri 2017b:fig. 2, Fig. 4a, b, e, g). The correspondence of MS38 on the La Mojarra stela with MS39 on the Tuxtla Statuette shows that already by the mid-second century CE, the Isthmian script had sufficient antiquity for there to developed significant local differences. That is, by that time, the script was already in use by communities that identified themselves through variations in their writing style.

Fig. 3. (a) MS38; (b) MS39.

Fifty years before La Mojarra Stela 1 was pulled from the Acula River in 1986, it had stood near the edge of the river on property owned by the Domínguez family. Small mounds and a plaza mark the archeological site of La Mojarra, with human occupation estimated to be as early as the late Formative period (Diehl 2004:186–87). Although precise archaeological data for the original location of the stela is not available, the approximate location and temporal context is known. The Tuxtla Statuette, on the other hand, is a portable object not associated with any archaeological information. So although we can estimate the time of carving of these two texts and can point out differences between the two script varieties, we cannot from internal evidence establish their precise geographic and temporal limits.

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