

Is the Olmec Writing African, Chinese or Mixe

The Olmec people introduced writing to the New World. Many Meso-American accept the possibility that the Olmecs were the first to 1) invent a complex system of chronology; 2) a method of calculating time; and 3) a hieroglyphic script which was later adopted by the Izapan and Mayan civilizations (Soustelle, 1984). As a result, the Olmec people left numerous inscriptions on monuments, celts and portable artifacts that give us keen insight into the Olmec culture, religion and politics.

Over a decade ago Winters (1979, 1997) deciphered the Olmec writing and discovered that you could read the Olmec inscriptions using the sound value of the Vai signs. The Olmecs spoke an aspect of the Manding (Malinke-Bambara) language spoken in West Africa (Winters, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1984).

Scholars have long recognized that the Olmecs engraved many symbols or signs on pottery, statuettes, batons/scepters, stelas and bas reliefs that have been regarded as a possible form of writing (Coe, 1965; Gay, 1973; Popenoe and Hatch, 1971; Soustelle, 1984). These experts accept the view that the system of dots and bars whether associated with glyphs or not, found on Olmec artifacts probably indicated their possession of a system of chronology (Soustelle, 1984). As a result, we find that the Olmec monuments: Altar 7, of LaVenta; Stela no.7 of LaVenta; Monument E at Tres Zapotes; Stela C of Tres Zapotes; and the Tuxtla statuette are engraved with calendrical information (Morell, 1991; Soustelle, 1984).

Although many Meso-Americanists accept the view that the Olmecs possessed calendrical symbols controversy surrounds the presence of writing among the Olmecs. Wiener (1922) and Lawrence (1961) have maintained that the Olmec writing was identical to the Manding writing used in Africa. Michael Coe and John Justeson (until recently), on the otherhand believe that the Olmecs possessed a form of iconography but not writing (Morell, 1991).

The question is, can the Olmec decipherment claims made by some researchers be supported by the archaeological and linguistic evidence? The noted scholar Cyrus H. Gordon, in , claims that he has deciphered Linear A or Minoan, using the Semitic languages. Although he has made this claim, the decipherment is not accepted because it does not have collateral evidence to support the decipherment.

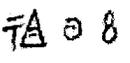
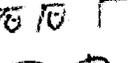
Maurice Pope in (1975), maintains that you reject a decipherment theory out right on three grounds: the decipherment is arbitrary, the decipherment is based on false principles, or the decipherment has been ousted by a better decipherment. The alleged Shang and Mixe-Zoque decipherments must be rejected because they are arbitrary and based on false principles.

Today there are three theories relating to the origin of the Olmec writing. The first theory is that the Olmec writing is an aspect of Malinke-Bambara. The other two theories maintain that the Olmec were Chinese speakers or speakers of a Mixe-Zoque language.

Justeson and Kaufman maintain that the Olmec spoke a Mixe-Zoque language. There are three problems with the Justeson and Kaufman decipherment of Epi-Olmec: 1) there

nYucatecan Maya to the other Mayan speakers. This term is probably not derived from Mixe-Zoque. If the Maya had got writing from the Mixe-Zoque, the term for writing would Probably be found in a Mixe-Zoque language. The fact that there is no evidence that 1)the Zoque were in the ancient Olmec land 3200 years ago, 2)there is no Zoque substrate language in Mayan, and 3) there is no such thing as "pre-Proto-Zoque" falsifies Justenson and Kaufman hypothesis.

Michael Xu assistant professor of Chinese Studies at Texas Christian University has proposed that the Olmec people may have written in the Chinese language. He based his opinion on the alleged similarity between the Olmec writing and the Shang writing.

| Symbols From the Past | | |
|---|---|----------------------------|
| Olmec | Shang | English |
|  |  | Divine |
|  |  | Listen Faithfully |
|  |  | Spirit Worship |
|  |  | Stone Structure |
|  |  | Temple |
|  |  | Mound; Grave |
|  |  | Container |
|  |  | Sacrificial Chopping Block |

This jade celt is among those excavated at La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico in 1955 and attributed to the Olmec. The striking similarities between the Olmec and Chinese Shang Dynasty symbols suggest that Chinese may have traveled to the Americas by boat well before the early 19th century. (Photo: Krantz & Martinez/Journal of Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences)

The Chinese wrote their inscriptions on Oracle bones. These Oracle bone inscriptions were written by the Shang people to divine the future.



This theory is fine except for the fact that the Olmec writing has little affinity to the Shang writing. Moreover some of the alleged similarities found by Xu do not relate to Shang writing at all. Below is a table of Shang symbols. A careful examination of the Shang table below and the Oracle bone inscriptions above clearly show that none of these signs are identical to the Olmec writing found on the LaVenta celt.

A cursory examination of the Shang signs depicted in this table clearly show that they do not match the alleged Shang signs identified by Xu in his article. In fact, a comparison of the actual signs on the LaVenta celt and the alleged "Shang" signs lack any agreement.

Symbols From the Past

| Olmec | Shang | English |
|-------|-------|----------------------------|
| | | Divine |
| | | Listen Faithfully |
| | | Spirit Worship |
| | | Stone Structure |
| | | Temple |
| | | Mound: Grave |
| | | Container |
| | | Sacrificial Chopping Block |

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The view that Africans originated writing in America is not new. Scholars early recognized the affinity between Amerindian scripts and the Mande script(s).

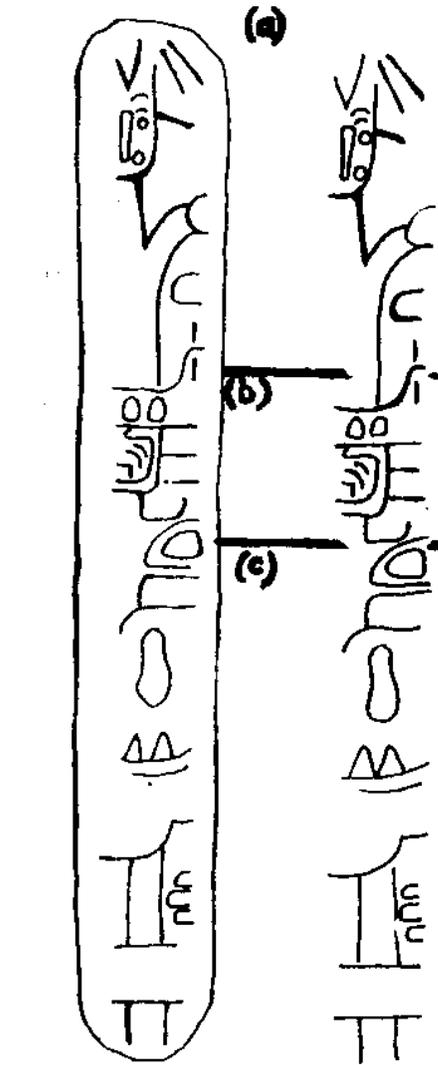
By 1832, Rafinesque noted the similarities between the Mayan glyphs and the Libyco-Berber writing. And Leo Wiener (1922, v.3), was the first researcher to recognize the resemblance's between the Manding writing and the symbols on the Tuxtla statuette.

In addition, Harold Lawrence (1962) noted that the "petroglyphic" inscriptions found throughout much of the southern hemisphere compared identically with the writing system of the Manding.

The Olmec inscriptions are primarily of three types 1) talismanic inscriptions found on monuments, statuettes, vessels, masks, and celts; 2) obituaries found on celts and other burial artifacts; and 3) signs on scepters denoting political authority.

OLMEC

MANDING



Celt
from
La Venta

- (a)
- ∧ Fe
 - ∨ Fe
 - ① = mi
 - ② 00 pè
 - ③ □ po
 - ④ T gbe
 - ⑤ L lu
 - ⑥ S bè
 - ⑦ M mā
 - ⑧ C yu
- (b)
- ① S ka
 - ② Δ 0 pè
 - ③ S ba
 - ④ E ko
 - ⑤ r se
 - ⑥ L yu
- (c)
- ∟ we
 - △ ta
 - — — — —
 - ∟ lu
 - ba
 - Kye
 - — — — —
 - △ gba
 - ∪ i
 - — — — —
 - ∩ mbe
 - po
 - ∪ be
 - — — — —
 - ∩ be

Above is a celt discovered in the 1950's at La Venta offering no. 4. This celt illustrates the similarities between the Olmec and Mande/Vai writing systems. The famous inscribed celts of offering no.4 LaVenta, indicate both the plain and cursive syllabic Olmec scripts .

A comparison of the Olmec and Vai (Mande signs) above illustrate correspondence between the symbols. This affinity between Olmec and Mande signs supported the hypothesis of Wiener that the Tuxtla statuette was written in a Mande/Malinke-Bambara language.

The Olmec script has two forms or stages : 1) syllabic and 2) hieroglyphic. The syllabic script was employed in the Olmec writing found on the masks, celts, statuettes and portable artifacts in general. The hieroglyphic script is usually employed on bas-reliefs, stelas (i.e., Mojarra) and tomb wall writing. The only exception to this rule for Olmec writing was the Tuxtla statuette.

In the cursive form of the writing the individual syllabic signs are joined to one another, in the plain Olmec writing the signs stand-alone. The cursive Olmec script probably evolved into Olmec hieroglyphics. The inscriptions engraved on celts and batons are more rounded than the script used on masks, statuettes and bas-reliefs.

In conclusion the Olmec spoke a Mande language. They did not speak Chinese or Mixe-Zoquean. Recognition of Malinke-Bambara as the language spoken by the Olmec allow us to read the numerous Olmec inscriptions.