

The Syllabic Olmec Writing

By
Clyde A. Winters, Ph.D



The Olmec writing is read from right to left. 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.

Olmec was an agglutinative language. Olmec had mixed syntactic constituents because of its use of affixes. The basic word order for Olmec was subject (S), object (O), and vowel (V) in simple declarative sentences. Due to the use of several prefixes in Olmec there are some VO sentences in the corpus of Olmec inscriptions.

The Olmec script has 13 consonants:

k

g

d -d-

t

n

b -b-

f

p

m

y -y-

l

w

s

In the Olmec script the consonants k, m, and n, was often placed in front of selected Olmec words, e.g., be : mbe, ngbe; and pe: Kpe. In these instances the nasal consonant can be dropped, and the monosyllabic word following the initial consonant element can be read , e.g., Kpe= pe ' spacious, pin down, flat lands, etc. Thusly, the appearance of CCV or CCCV Olmec forms are the result of the addition of initial consonantal elements to monosyllabic Olmec terms.

Syllabic Writing

The famous inscribed celts of offering no.4 LaVenta, indicate both the plain (Fig. 1) and cursive syllabic Olmec scripts (Fig. 2). 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. The pottery writing on the Los Bocas and Tlatilco ware are also in a fine rounded style.

In this chapter we will use the inscribed celts found at La Venta in 1955, at offering No.4, the inscribed jadeite celt from near El Sitio, and the Black Stone Serpent Scepter of Cardenas, Tabasco as examples of the Olmec writing. All the translations of Olmec artifacts are based on the Manding dictionary of Delafosse (1921).

The celts of La Venta offering no.4, were discovered by Drucker in 1955. These celts show both the plain and cursive forms of the Olmec script. These inscribed celts were part of a collection of 16 figurines and jade and serpentine found in offering no.4 (Soustelle, 1984).

In La Venta offering no.4, fifteen figurines were arranged around a central figure. According to the inscriptions on the celts in this collection, the personage buried in this tomb was Pè. The bold head of Pè suggest that he was their cult leader.

A pit had been dug over the incised celts and figurines, a hole leading from the earth's surface down to the burial cache suggest that this was used for pouring libations on the figurines. This view is supported by the fact that the inscriptions written in the plain Olmec syllabic style (Fig. 1), mentions the fact that Pè tomb was to act as a talisman or protective shrine for the faithful.

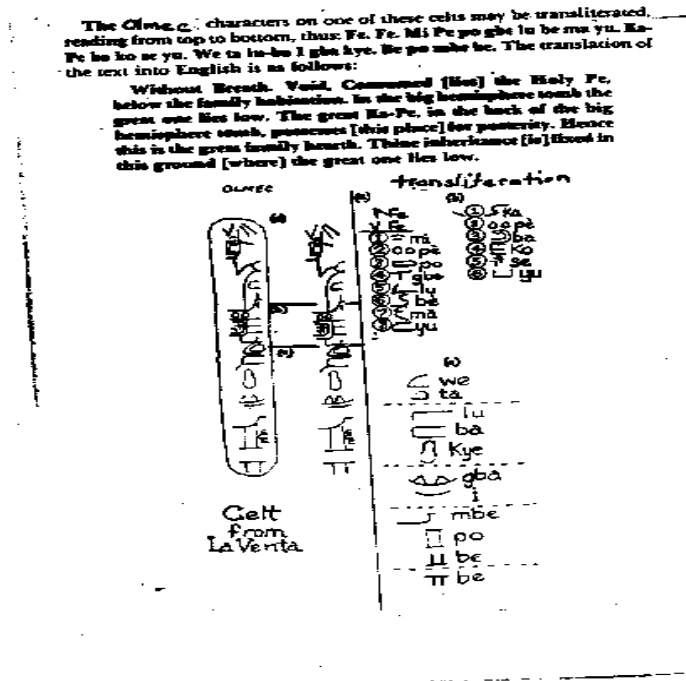
The six celts found in La Venta offering no.4, were arranged in a semi-circle. Four of the celts were engraved. The first and last celts in the semi-circle were not engraved.

Moving from left to right two engraved jade celts when joined together depict an Olmec priest wearing an elaborate headdress and holding what appears to be a torch or baton in his hand. This figure probably represented Pè. It is analogous to the figure engraved on a jade Breastplate (no. 13:583), now located in the National Museum of Anthropology at Mexico City (Wuthenau, 1980).

The first two celts probably were originally joined together and served as a symbol of authority for the deceased priest while he was alive. The breakage of this celt into two parts probably symbolized the withdrawal of the priest's physical body, from the physical plane to the spiritual plane. The placement in the tomb of Pè's "celt of power" was meant to hold his spiritual power at the grave site.

The third engraved celt at La Venta offering no.4, was engraved in the cursive Olmec script (Fig. 2). In the text of the cursive script we find Pè's obituary.

Fig 2.



Transliteration of Symbols on Figure 1

Fè fè mi pè po gbè

without breath void consumed Pè pure/holy below (in)

lu bè ma

the family habitation lay low the celebrity (the) Lord (in)

yu ka-pè ba ko

the big hemisphere tomb Ka-Pè the Great (in) the back of

se yu we

(to) possess for posterity the big hemisphere tomb Hence

ta lu ba i

this place the family habitation great/strong thine

gba kyè be po

fixed in the ground inheritance/estate here pure/holy

mbe be

lay low the celebrity lay low the celebrity.

Translation

" Without breath. Void. Consumed (lies) the Hole Pè, below the family habitation. Lay low the celebrity, the Lord, in the hemisphere tomb. The Great Ka-Pè, in the back of the big hemisphere tomb, possesses (this place) for posterity. Thine inheritance (is) fixed in this ground. Here the pure celebrity lays low. Lay low the celebrity".

Vocabulary

fè, v. to be void, empty, without breath

mi, v. consumed

Pè, proper name; v. spacious, pin down

po, adj. : superlative of white translated as holy, pure, the good

gbè, v. lay low, below; virtue

lu, family habitation

bè, v: lay low the celebrity

ma, it can be translated as "Great one" or "Lord"; it

can also be a suffix joined to a substantive or a verb

to show intensity.

yu, the big hemisphere tomb

Ka, a title given to Olmec elites

ba, adj.: great

ka, adv.: in the back of

se, possess (this place) for posterity

we, adv.: hence

ta, this place, place, here

lu, n.: the family habitation

ba, adj.: great

i, pronominal particle of the second person: thine, thou, you

gba, transitive v.: fixed in the ground

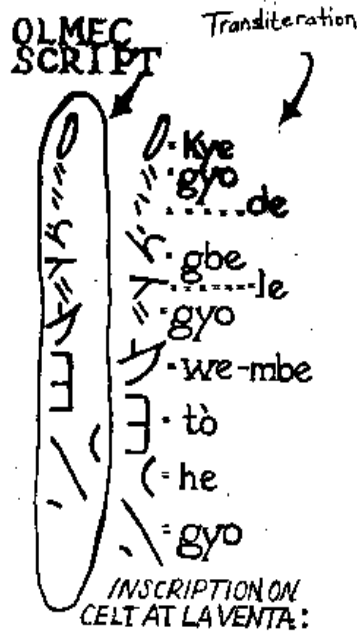
kyè, inheritance, estate

be, here

It is interesting to note that on this celt, after the use of the Olmec term po, a /g/ or /m/ is prefixed to bè, to make this word into a CCV term. Another interesting fact about this inscription is that reduplication is used at the end, and beginning of this inscription to denote emphasis.

The fourth engraved celt from left to right in La Venta offering no.4, is written in the plain Olmec script (Fig. 1). This inscription declares that the tomb of Pè is a talisman of great power.

Fig. 1



He was faithful to his God, a man of virtue. Hence here, his place of rest, is an effective talisman (protective shrine) for the virtuous.

Transliteration of Figure 1

Kyè gyo dè gbè
A man the leader of the cult indeed virtue
le gyo we mbè to
to be consecration hence here place of rest

he gyo
good talisman.

Translation

"The man (was) the leader of the cult. Indeed (a man of) virtue to be an object of consecration. Hence here a place of rest (a) good talisman (protective shrine for the faithful)".

Vocabulary

kyè, Man

gyo, one faithful to the cult/deity, object of consecration,

leader of the cult association; talisman, amulet

dè, suffix of determination or definite article; indeed

gbè, virtue, righteousness, etc.

le, verbal postposition: to be

we, adv.: therefore, hence

mbè, here

to, place of rest

he, adj.: good

Navarrete (1974) , has published two interesting engraved pieces. They are scepters, the Black Stone Serpent Scepter (Fig.3) and, an incised jadeite celt from El Sitio (Fig. 4).

The Black stone scepter from Cardenas, Tobasco (Fig. 3) has only two characters to/tu and bè. These characters indicate that this was indeed a scepter and symbolized the sovereign's high office and power. The signs **tu bè** can be interpreted as "Royalty rest here" or "Scrupulous observer of the Law".

Decipherment of the Syllabic signs on the Short Side Mojarra Stela

The newly discovered column of this text published in July 1997. The new side text column on the Mojarra stela provides interesting information about the Olmec people. This column of Epi-Olmec text was published by J. Justeson and Terrence Kaufman, "A newly discovered column in the Hieroglyphic text on La Mojarra stela 1: A test of the epi-Olmec Decipherment", Science, 277 (11 July 1997) pp.207-210. In this article Justeson and Kaufman, claim that decipherment of this text proves their decipherment of epi-Olmec using Mije-Sokean. This claim is false. This text was written in the Olmec language, which is a variety of the Mande group of languages.

They claim that the text reads as follows:

" Behold, there/he was for 12 years a [title]

And then a garment got folded

He [uttered]

--the stones that he set in order were thus symbols,?kingly ones

What I chopped has been planted and harvested well

(A) shape-shifter(s) appeared divinely in his body(p.208)".

These new inscriptions come from a badly weathered and eroded hieroglyphic column. They were found in November 1995 on the side of Stela 1 from La Mojarra a riverine site in southern Veracruz.

The personages recorded in the Mojarra and Tuxtla statuette are not the same. A Governor named Tutu, is recorded in the Tuxtla statuette. The text of the Mojarra Stela is about a King Yo Pe.

. The Mojarra inscriptions are compound Olmec signs. Compound Olmec signs are signs which are made up of more than one syllabic signs.

We read the signs in this text from top to bottom, outside inside. For example, the first Olmec sign reading the Mojarra short side text from top to bottom is made up of three signs([The Mojarra Side Inscription](#)). The box figure means Po, the three vertical lines inside the box equal tò or se , and the line separating the three vertical lines is the Olmec pronoun i. Thus this sign can be read either as Po i tò "Thou Righteous King " ; or " Po i se " You have realized purity.

A	B	
		Below is a transliteration of the the 30 "signs" in ColumB of the Mojarra text.
		1. Po i tò
		Thou (art a) righteous King.
		2. I po su ba su
		Thou (art) pure. Offer libations to this unique Ba
		3. Se gyo
		(of) the Se gyo.
		4. Po tu Po/ Po da tu Po
		The pure grand refuge is smooth
		5. ???????
		6. Po ku tu
		Pure cleansing this refuge
		Po gbe tu tu
		The sanctified King and his refuge
		7. Po ni tu fa
		The pure principal of life is in possession of this abode
		8. Ba su
		The Ba is vigorous
		8b. Pe kyu
		Prodigious tomb
		9. ???????
		10. Yo Pe
		King Yo Pe
		11. Po i tu
		Pure (is) thine refuge
		12. Se ni gyo tè to nde
		[Yo Pe's] Principal of life to realize no vice
		(in this) good abode/habitation on terrain near the water
		13. Pe kyu
		The prodigious tomb
		14. Ni tu la
		The soul of the King sleeps
		or
		Ni gyu la
		The-soul, and spiritual tranquility (is) established
		15. Yo be
		The vital spirit (has) been put to bed
		16. Po
		(In) Purity

17. Yo ngbe Bi
The soul is pure righteousness of the great ancestor
18. Yo Pe
29. Po su
The pure libation
20. Lu kyu lu kyu
Hold upright this hemispheric tomb.
Hold upright this hemispheric tomb.
21. Be ta gyu
[It] exist in a unique state of spiritual tranquility
22. Po i tu
Pure is thine refuge
23. Yo Pe
24. Po tu
Righteous King
25. Po i ku tu
Thou head the government is pure
26. Po tu lu (lit. Purity head government/king hold upright)
The head of the government holds upright Purity.
27. Ta ki ku gyo ta kye ba gba da
Ta Ki "[This] sacre raising of a star [Yo Pe]
Ku gyo "[is] the summit of righteousness
Ta kye ba "This man [is] great
gba da "[he] glows at this moment
" [Yo Pe] is a raising star. [He is] the summit
of righteousness. This man [Yo Pe] is great. [He] glows [like a shining star] at this moment."
28. Da
At this moment
29. Po yo ta fa ta
The pure image of the race and mystic order is full of propriety"
30. Yo Pe

In these inscriptions I have translated the word kyu 'hemisphere drum' as hemispheric tomb. I have translated kyu/tyu as hemisphere tomb, because although this term means hemisphere drum today I believe that in Proto-Manding times this term was used to describe the hemispheric tombs built to entomb Olmec kings. This view is supported by the fact that in many Olmec inscriptions Olmec words for habitation are often associated with the use of kyu (see lines 13 and 14).

Below is a transliteration of the the 30 "signs" in the Short Side or B side of the Mojarra stela.

1. Po i tò

Thou (art a) righteous King.

2. I po su ba su

Thou (art) pure. Offer libations to this unique Ba

3. Se gyo

(of) the Se gyo.

4. Po tu Po/ Po da tu Po

The pure grand refuge is smooth

5. ????????

6. Po ku tu

Pure cleansing this refuge

Po gbe tu tu

The sanctified King and his refuge

7. Po ni tu fa

The pure principal of life is in possession of this abode

8. Ba su

The Ba is vigorous

9. Pe kyu

Prodigious tomb

10. ??????

11. Yo Pe

King Yo Pe

12. Po i tu

Pure (is) thine refuge

13. Se ni gyo tè to nde

[Yo Pe's] Principal of life to realize no vice

(in this) good abode/habitation on terrain near the water

14. Pe kyu

The prodigious tomb

15. Ni tu la

The soul of the King sleeps

or

Ni gyu la

The soul, and spiritual tranquility (is) established

16. Yo be

The vital spirit (has) been put to bed

17. Po

(In) Purity

18. Yo ngbe Bi

The soul is pure righteousness of the great ancestor

19. Yo Pe

20. Po su

The pure libation

21. Lu kyu lu kyu

Hold upright this hemispheric tomb.

Hold upright this hemispheric tomb.

22. Be ta gyū

[It] exist in a unique state of spiritual tranquility

23. Po i tu

Pure is thine refuge

24. Yo Pe

25. Po tu

Righteous King

26. Po i ku tu

Thou head the government is pure

27. Ta ki ku gyo ta kye ba gba da

Ta Ki "[This] sacre raising of a star [Yo Pe]

Ku gyo "[is] the summit of righteousness

Ta kye ba "This man [is] great

gba da "[he] glows at this moment

" [Yo Pe] is a raising star. [He is] the summit
of righteousness. This man [Yo Pe] is great. [He]
glows [like a shinning star] at this moment."

28. Da

At this moment

29. Po yo ta fa ta

The pure image of the race and mystic order is full of propriety"

30. Yo Pe Po yo ta fa ta Yo Pe

"The pure image of the race and mystic order, full of propriety [is] Yo Pe."

In summary, Justeson and Kaufman's translation of this text using Mije-Sokean (Zoquean) fails to convey the richness of Olmec prose and the deep love and respect that the Olmec gave their kings. Whereas these scholars translate the new inscriptions as follows:

" Behold, there/he was for 12 years a [title]
And then a garment got folded
He [uttered]
-the stones that he set in order were thus symbols,?kingly ones
What I chopped has been planted and harvested well
(A) shape-shifter(s) appeared divinely in his body(p.208)".

This decipherment by Justeson and Kaufman does not prove that the Mojarra stela is written in Zoquean. The authors translating this inscription admit they still can not read the entire document using pre-proto-Sokean to interpret the alleged epi-Olmec logograms. This translation contrast sharply with my decipherment of the new Mojarra text.

Justeson and Kaufman believe that this long inscription is about "folded garments" , and a dignitary chopping crops while a "shapeshifter" appears in "his body". My decipherment, on the otherhand, based on the authentic language of the Olmecs indicates that the Mojarra Stela was a funerary text, acknowledging the potent mystical power of the Olmec King Yo Pe.