



Glyph Dwellers

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Isthmian Script at Chiapa de Corzo

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The archaeological site of Chiapa de Corzo in Chiapas, Mexico, has a history that spans from the early Formative period, perhaps as early as 1150 BCE, to about 600 CE, well into the Classic period (Bachand and Lowe 2011). Situated in the Grijalva River valley, it was, in addition to being a major ceremonial center, a crossroads between the Gulf Coast region and the Pacific Piedmont of Guatemala. Its affinity with the Olmec of La Venta can be seen from the similarity in placement of a number of architectural features, as well as from Olmec style jade celts, stone carvings, and figurines (Bachand and Lowe 2011). The site is unique in providing archaeological contexts for three artifacts from Middle and Late Preclassic periods that relate directly to the Isthmian script: an inscribed potsherd, a stela with a cycle seven long count date with a day name and number, and a tortoise shell pendant depicting an Olmec style carving of a person with a distinctive Isthmian-style ear ornament. All three of these items, including the stela fragment, are small enough to be considered portable objects—that is, they could easily be moved from one location to another. The incised sherd seems to represent a local manufacture; Stela 2 is unique among stela fragments in its light color and smooth finish; and the pendant of course, could easily have been manufactured elsewhere. Nevertheless, the information they offer about the Isthmian script, minimal though it may be, suggests that the script was known to the people of Chiapa de Corzo and was used by them in varying contexts for a significant amount of time. Thanks to the work of the New World Archaeological Foundation from the 1960s, a thorough stratigraphy exists for the Chiapa de Corzo region, supporting a more precise dating than is available for any other objects bearing Isthmian texts (e.g., G. Lowe 1962a).

Incised Sherd with Isthmian Text



Fig. 1. Chiapa de Corzo pottery Sherd (photo by M. Looper modified by Macri).

The Chiapa de Corzo sherd has 11 incised glyphs, with edges of perhaps two or three more signs, showing that the fragment is part of a longer passage (Fig. 1). The text segment, brief as it is, includes two examples of MS20 (the "ending sign") and at least five or six other signs known from other Isthmian texts. It was found in fill from Mound 5b by archaeologists from the New World Archaeological Foundation in the 1960s. Gareth Lowe (1962a:18) states that Chamber B contained "loose uncompacted building debris" and several caches of pottery vessels and dates the findings to the Horcones Phase (Lowe 1962a:24). Sylvia Méluzin (1995:8), however, quotes a later personal communication from Lowe assigning the inscribed sherd to the Francesca-Guanacaste phases, significantly earlier than his 1962 estimate. **Table 1** includes the dates for Chiapa de Corzo cultural periods from Lowe (1962a) as well as more recent estimates by Bachand (2013). Although the sherd text is too brief to be of use in a formal analysis of the script, it clearly establishes the presence of the script in central Chiapas as early as the Late Preclassic. This expands both the temporal and geographic range of the script, placing the sherd one or more centuries earlier than the long count dates on La Mojarra Stela 1 and the Tuxtla Statuette, and some distance from the Gulf region. Another incised sherd found near the Mexican-Guatemalan border (Dobereiner and Jiménez Alvarez 2015) will be discussed in a future note.

Table 1. Middle to Late Preclassic Chronology at Chiapa de Corzo.

Cultural Period	Local Phase	Bachand (2013:14)	Lowe (1962a:2)
Protoclassic 2	Horcones	0-200 CE	0-100 CE
Protoclassic 1	Guanacaste	150-0 BCE	250-0 CE
Late Formative	Francesa	400-150 BCE	450-250 BCE
Middle Formative	Etzpa	550-400 BCE	
Middle Formative	Escalera	750-550 BCE	550-450 BCE



Stela 2

Stela 2 from Chiapa de Corzo was found in 1961 in the surface fill of Mound 5b (Lowe 1962b:194). It has the day 6 Reed, and above it is a partial long count: 13 for the number of days, 2 for the number of 20-day periods, 4 for the number of 360-day periods, and at least two bars for 10 for the number of 20 x 360-day periods. The number for the 400 x 360-day periods, the "cycle," is missing. The day 6 Reed occurs every 260 days, but as part of a long count, the possibilities are much more restricted. Lowe (1962b) favors a long count date of 7.16.3.2.13, corresponding to 35 BCE. If we accept this date and assume that it represents a day close to the time of its creation, Stela 2 fits toward the end the Guanacaste phase at Chiapa de Corzo. This date makes it the earliest of only three cycle-seven monuments known; the other two being monuments from El Baúl and Tres Zapotes (**Table 2**). Tak'alik Ab'aj Stela 2, formerly dated as cycle-seven, is now recognized as a cycle-eight monument (Doering and Collins 2011).

Table 2. Cycle 7 and Early Cycle 8 Long Counts.

Long Count	Day	Year	Item	Region	Country
7.16.3.2.13	6 Reed	35 BCE	Chiapa de Corzo St. 2	Chiapas	Chiapas, Mexico
7.16.6.16.18	6 [Flint]	32 BCE	Tres Zapotes St. C	Gulf	Veracruz, Mexico
7.18. __.12	12 Grass	2 CE+	El Baúl St. 1	Pacific	Escuintla, Guatemala
8.5.3.3.5	13 [Serpent]	143 CE	La Mojarra St. 1	Gulf	Veracruz, Mexico
8.5.16.9.7	[5] Deer	156 CE	La Mojarra St. 1	Gulf	Veracruz, Mexico
8.6.2.4.17	8 [Movement]	162 CE	Tuxtla Statuette	Gulf	Veracruz, Mexico

The format of the day of the 260-day calendar is the same as those on La Mojarra Stela 1, the Tuxtla Statuette, and Tres Zapotes, Stela C (**Fig. 2**). That is, the day sign is encircled by a border and is slightly wider than the width of the bar-dot number column, and the coefficient of the day is to the left of the day sign, well outside the glyph column. So although there is no glyphic text, this fragmentary date is consistent with the three early texts from the Gulf region that have long counts. Since this pattern of dating occurs on two items bearing Isthmian inscriptions, it is likely that the stelae from Chiapa de Corzo and Tres Zapotes may also be parts of Isthmian texts. This would suggest that the script reaches back at least two hundred years earlier than the La Mojarra Stela and the Tuxtla Statuette, both with long counts from the second century CE. The day name and number and the long count on Stela 1 from El Baúl, also with a cycle-seven date, follow a very different pattern that contrasts with those in the Isthmian tradition, with the day name and number placed before the long count.

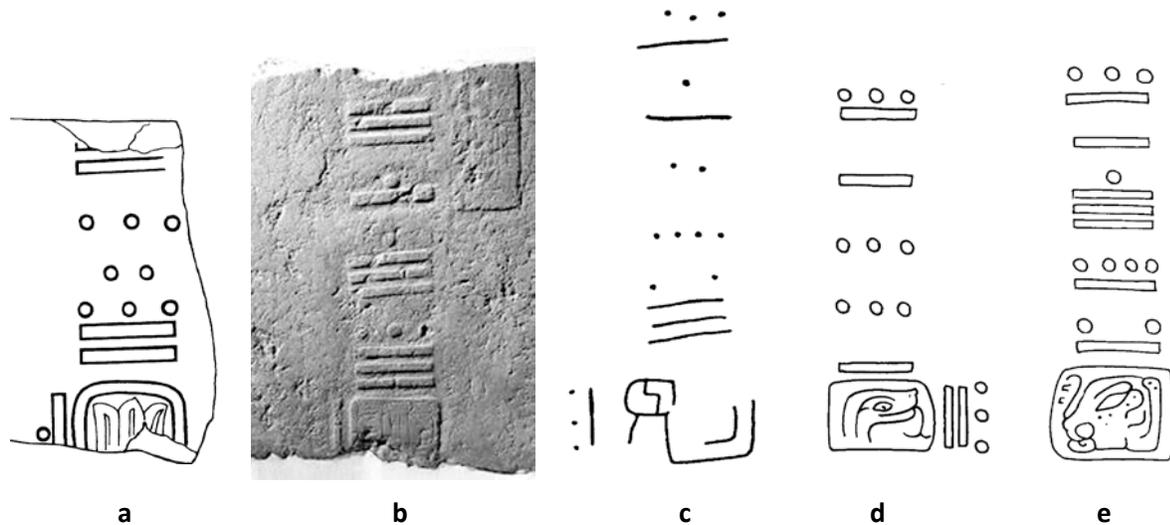
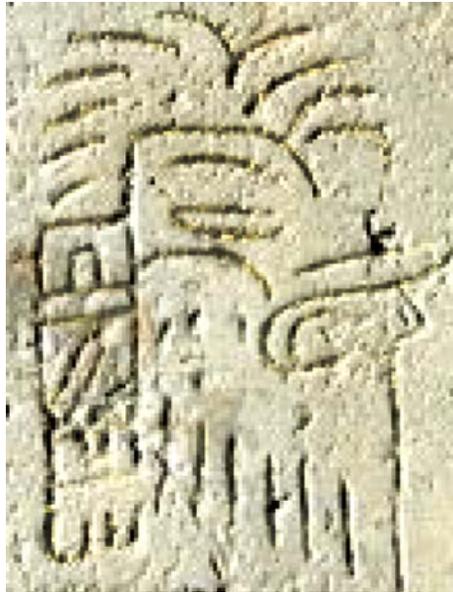


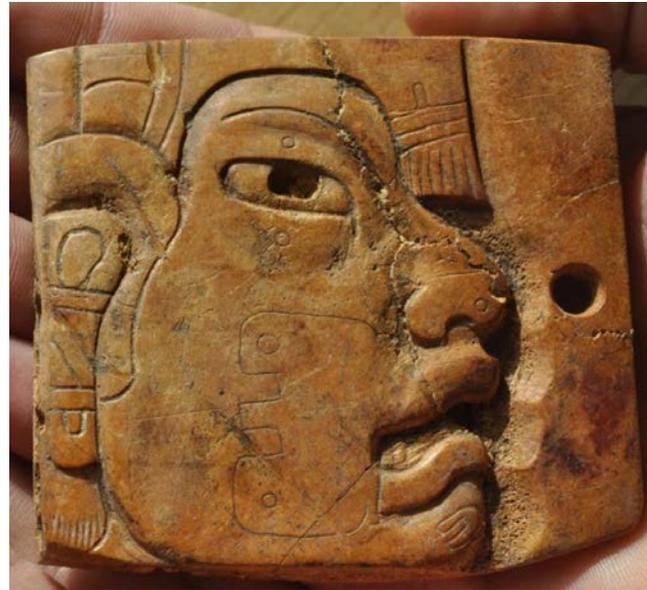
Fig. 2. (a) Chiapa de Corzo, Stela 2, after Coe (1976:fig. 3); (b) Lower Portion of Tres Zapotes, Stela C, modified after Pérez de Lara and Justeston (2006); (c) Tuxtla Statuette; (d) La Mojarra, left side, orientation reversed; (e) La Mojarra, right side (day coefficient is missing) [c., d., e., after G. Stuart in Winfield Capitaine (1988:fig. 11, 15b)].

Carved Tortoise Shell Pendant

An archaeological investigation of Mound 11 at Chiapa de Corzo under the direction of Bruce R. Bachand and Emiliano Gallaga Murrieta discovered several burials (Bachand and Lowe 2011). Burial 4 dates to the Escalera phase, estimated at 600–400 BCE. One of the two individuals in the tomb wore an elaborate necklace with beads of bone and snail shells and a finely carved tortoise shell pendant (**Fig. 3b**). Found in a carefully excavated burial, the pendant constitutes the oldest uniquely Isthmian image ever found. For the first time, an image similar in several details to signs in the Isthmian script appears in a context securely dated to late Olmec times. The carving is that of a profile head with a distinctive ear ornament. What follows is a comparison of head signs found on La Mojarra Stela 1 and the Tuxtla Statuette with the image on the tortoise shell pendant.



a



b

Fig. 3. Comparison of La Mojarrá Stela 1, F5 and Shell Pendant from Chiapa de Corzo, Mound 11, Burial 4. (a) Photograph modified after Pérez de Lara and Justeson (2006); (b) Photograph by Lynne Lowe, used with permission).

Most of the ear ornaments depicted in Olmec art are circular. This is also typical of most Late Preclassic and Early Classic images. Likewise, in the Isthmian script, the majority of human/deity face signs are shown with a round ear flare (Fig. 4).

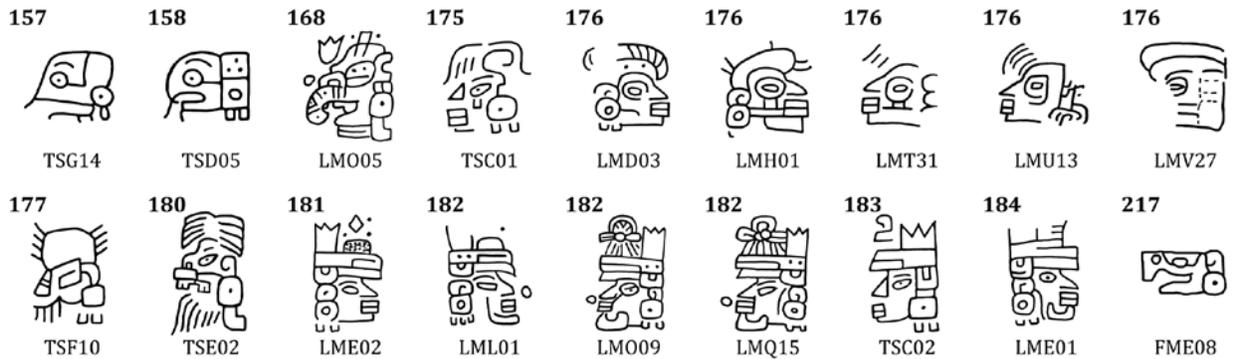


Fig. 4. Isthmian signs with circular ear flares.

Examples of signs MS170 and MS171 show a rectangular shape topped with two small rectangles and circles above it placed either over the ear or to the back of the head (Fig. 5). These two very similar signs are differentiated only by the shapes of their mouths.

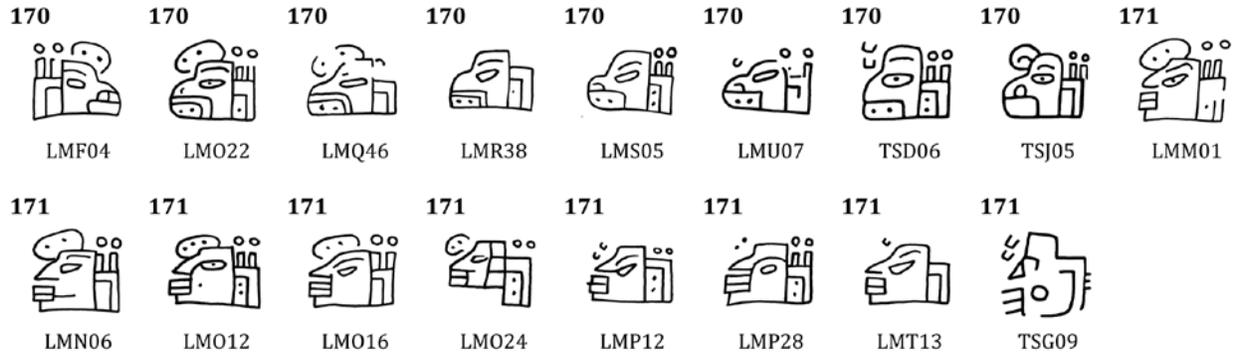


Fig. 5. MS170 and MS171 with rectangular shapes behind the head.

Four other Isthmian signs have other sorts of rectangular ornaments over their ear or at the back of their head (Fig. 6). See David Mora-Marín (2002) for a discussion of rectangular Epi-Olmec ear/head decorations.

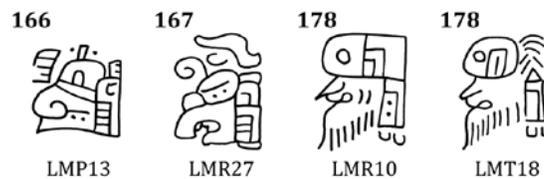


Fig. 6. Other signs with rectangular shapes behind the head.

However, there is yet another Isthmian earflare that is relevant to the image on the pendant (Fig. 7). The first two examples in Figure 7 are MS36, recognized by scholars as a "sky" sign (matching the top part of the Classic Maya "sky" sign), angled above an "earth" sign. The "earth" sign appears as a base under the feet of standing figures from a number of early monuments, including Monuments 1 and 2 from El Mesón in central Veracruz and monuments from Izapa and Kaminaljuyu in Guatemala (Guernsey 2006:fig. 4.3).

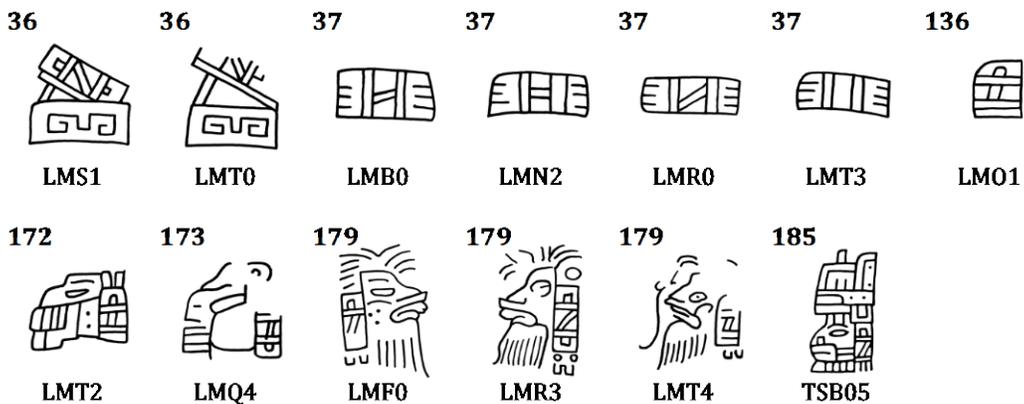


Fig. 7. "Sky" signs and "sky" ear ornaments.

In the Maya script, one grapheme has a configuration similar to MS36. The grapheme ZX2 **PAS** 'dawn' (Macri and Looer 2003) shows the Maya "sky" sign angled above the Maya "earth" sign, with the sun between them (**Fig. 8**). At least 90 examples of ZX2 occur on Classic Period monuments and pottery vessels. However, the earliest example dates to 593 CE, more than 400 years after the Isthmian example. We can speculate that either the two are completely independent inventions, or that we lack evidence of an extensive shared history between the Isthmian and the Maya scripts.

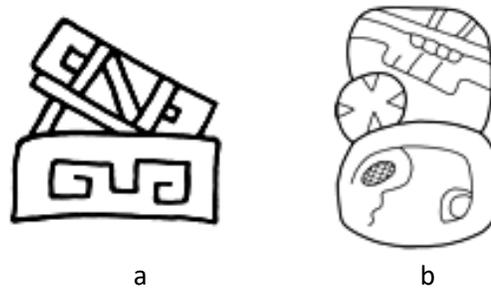


Fig. 8. Comparison of Isthmian grapheme MS36 and Maya grapheme ZX2. (a) MS36, after Stuart in Winfield Capitaine (1988); (b) ZX2, from Copán Stela N Altar, drawing by M. Looer.

Following the sky-earth signs in **Figure 7** are five examples of MS37, the "sky" alone. Following this are six Isthmian examples of faces with MS37 as their ear ornament. Whether MS37 marks them as deities, astronomical bodies, or is part of the name of one or more historical persons is unclear. Significantly, this sky ornament is not typically found on Olmec, Maya, Izapan, Teotihuacan, or Zapotec figures; in fact, after an extensive search I have not yet found any examples at all.



Fig. 9. MS 178 on La Mojarrá Stela 1, F5, R39, T40, after Stuart in Winfield Capitaine (1988).

Figure 9 shows the three examples of MS178 in context. The last two examples show a fair amount of erosion with some details missing. The clearest example is at F5, also shown in the photograph in Fig. 3a. The profile head on the tortoise shell pendant is notable in that it does not have a typical circular ear ornament, but a rectangular "sky" sign, MS36, placed on its ear. The tassels of hair coming down over the forehead and showing beneath the ear are similar to the hair on MS179. The example of MS179 in **Figures 3a and 9** also show the detail of a facial marking (a line and three dots), similar to the marking



on the cheek of the face on the pendant; and on the chin there is a slight indication of a beard. Both the glyphs and the image on the pendant have exaggerated mouths.

Whether the fully developed Isthmian script already existed in late Olmec times is unknown. What the pendant demonstrates is that images particular to the script (the sky sign and a face with the sky sign as an ear ornament) were known and were revered by the person who carved the pendant and by the people who interred it in Burial 4. The presence of this image is consistent with the evidence of an extensive cultural association between Chiapa de Corzo and the Gulf Region.

This pendant, along with the incised sherd and the fragment of Stela 2, although only a small fraction of the total amount of material recovered from Chiapa de Corzo, testify to the presence of Isthmian traditions at the site, either continuously or sporadically over a period of many centuries.

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