Surprisingly, a survey of the epigraphic literature reveals few cross-cultural examples with which to compare the presence and distribution of Mayan pseudo-glyphs. However, my research indicates that the presence of pseudo-glyphs correlates with periods of shifting social and economic circumstances and societies endowed with a market economy.

**A Cross-Cultural Look at Pseudo-glyphs**

Pseudo-glyphs are found in the archaeological records of ancient Greece, the Byzantine Mediterranean (especially Turkey and Spain), and Egypt. Before turning to a review of Egyptian pseudo-glyphs, I will briefly comment on the traditions of pseudo-inscription in Greece and the Islamic Mediterranean. Although I have not investigated these cross-cultural examples in depth, it is possible that additional research may reveal information by literate scribes of the period regarding the nature of pseudo-glyphs.

**Greece and the Islamic Mediterranean**

Between 565-500 B.C., Greek potters produced amphora decorated with images of decorative animal friezes and bearing unintelligible inscriptions for export to Central and Southern Italy (Boardman 1974:36-37). Identified as “Tyrrenian
amphorae,” only a few of these vessels have been excavated from Aegean sites; the majority were recovered from the Etruscan cities of Caere and Vulci. Clark and others (2002) note that the distinctly ovoid-shaped amphora employed multiple colors in order to attract a market already familiar with Corinthian tradewares. In addition to pseudo-writing, Greek artists decorated the ceramics for export with the earliest images of Athenian sexual encounters (Boardman 1974:36-37). Rather than conforming to the conventions of Greek vase painting, Tyrrhenian amphorae displayed a combination of motifs, colors and inscriptions designed to please a foreign market. Although it may be assumed that the artists themselves knew how to write, they rarely inscribed literate messages on ceramics destined for foreign shores.

“Pseudo-Kufic,” a decorative form that resembles the Arabic Kufic script but does not form pronounceable words, appeared on ceramic artifacts, tiles and minted currency distributed throughout the Mediterranean coastline beginning in the 11th century (Rynearson 2006). Pseudo-Kufic borders were knitted, woven and printed on clothing and rugs (biti-Anat 2006, Suriano 2001). Ceramics decorated with pseudo-Kufic motifs were recovered during the underwater excavation of an 11th century Byzantine merchant ship along the coast of present-day Turkey. Made in modern-day Lebanon or northern Israel, the pots had been carefully-packed for transport to markets located farther west (Bass and van Doornick 2006). The tradition of producing and selling artifacts with pseudo-Kufic motifs continued throughout the 16th century (Rogers and Ward 1988:191, Figure 130).

In form, pseudo-Kufic employs knotted ligatures, decorative ascenders and repeated groups of Kufic letters (Rogers and Ward 1988:190, Figure 129). Arabic
letters endowed with divine or talismanic meaning (like alif, “A”) repeat in a mnemonic fashion to evoke phrases from the Koran or the 99 beautiful names (Welch 1979:25). The creation of objects with pseudo-Kufic aided in the expansion of Byzantine-Muslim aesthetics and religious symbolism into regions formerly dominated by non-Arabic speakers. For the cognoscenti, the illegible marks affirmed their faith and cultural participation, while for others, the calligraphy-like forms provided a pleasing decorative pattern (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2006).

In addition to the Greek and Islamic examples, my research located references to artifacts from ancient Egypt embellished with pseudo-hieroglyphic text. Like Mayan, Egyptian hieroglyphs recorded only a single language and, for most of its history, the use of hieroglyphic text on stone monuments defined Egypt’s boundaries.

**Egyptian Pseudo-hieroglyphs**

The first Egyptian hieroglyphic pictographs appeared on portable art produced sometime around 3100 B.C. (Ritner 1996:73). At approximately the same time, hieratic or “priestly” script developed as a cursive equivalent to record economic transactions, religious texts and correspondence. During the seventh century B.C., demotic or “popular” writing (also known as “cursive hieroglyphic,” see Houston et al. 2003:439) further abbreviated and simplified the hieroglyphic signs to facilitate the transcription of speech. Because the writing systems of Egypt were tied to a single Hamito-Semitic language, the script was endowed with an “enormous ideological weight” that served self-consciously to unify the culture (Baines 2004:164, Houston, et al. 2003:442). Following the decipherment of Egyptian
hieroglyphics, epigraphers have identified examples of pseudo-hieroglyphs that do not conform to the canons of any of the three established writing systems.

**Cylinder Seals.** The earliest Egyptian pseudo-hieroglyphs are attested on small cylinder seals created during the 1st-2nd dynastic period (sometime after 2950 B.C.). Of the four identified examples, three were made of black soapstone and one of wood (Figure 255). Three of the seals are organized semi-pictorially with a seated figure at the right and glyph-like elements on the left (Baines 2004:183). The “text” consisted of single consonantal signs that did not combine to form words (Houston et al. 2003:444-445).

It has been speculated that the cylinders functioned as emblems to reinforce the prestige of their owners by identifying the sealed objects as personal property. However, since all of the seals lack archaeological context, little more can be suggested regarding their social role or function.

**Horus Stelae.** Identified by archaeologists as “Horus Stelae,” small plaques of stone inscribed with a standardized sequence of incantations dedicated to the deity Horus first appeared during the Nineteenth Dynasty (ca. 1305-1080 B.C.). During her analysis of monuments curated in a variety of museums, Sternberg-El Hotabi (1994, 1999) identified 20 Horus Stelae dated to the Late Ptolemaic/Greco-Roman Period (ca. 180-30 B.C.) that bore pseudo-hieroglyphic markings (Figure 256). Based on epigraphic and iconic criteria, she grouped these monuments into three categories:

**Type I-a** — Stelae produced during a period of transition during which pseudo-glyphic *Füllsel* (roughly translated as “space-fillers”) appeared within
the standardized incantations. The space-fillers carved into the monuments may have served to highlight the syntactical transposition of certain words or as a type of punctuation (Sternberg-El Hotabi 1999:127). Iconographic analysis indicates that at least two workshops were engaged in manufacturing Type I-a stelae. Additional examples of this type of pseudo-glyph are found on papyri from the Late Ptolemaic period (Sternberg-El Hotabi 1999:127).

**Type I-b** — Stylistically-dated to between 265-230 B.C., the faces of Type I-b stelae bore orthodox incantations, while the backs displayed a random sequence of about 15 hieroglyphs (Sternberg-El Hotabi 1999:137).

**Type I-c** — Only the posture and associated icons of Horus distinguished Type I-c stelae from those of Type I-a; both types contained conventional text interspersed with non-legible pseudo-hieroglyphics. Based on stylistic similarities, Sternberg-El Hotabi (1999:145) suggested that all five of the Type I-c Horus Stelae were manufactured at a single workshop during the Ptolemaic Period.

As noted by Sternberg-El Hotabi (1999:2), none of the Horus Stelae derived from archaeologically-documented contexts. The absence of personal (including royal) names on the stelae preclude ascribing an absolute date of manufacture or use, although stylistic comparison indicates the objects were produced during the Late Ptolemaic/Greco-Roman period. A diachronic survey revealed that, in addition to the use of pseudo-glyphs, these Horus stelae no longer adhered to the artistic canons established in 1200 B.C. Sternberg-El Hotabi(1999:122) noted that the faces and figures of Horus on these stelae were so lacking in detail as to suggest mass-
production. Grajetzki (Grajetzki 2003) suggested that the crude workmanship reflected changed social values as the function of Horus Stelae moved from public monument to private, devotional amulet. Unfortunately, discovering whether the monuments with pseudo-glyphs were as highly valued as other Horus Stelae would require more information about archaeological provenience (Houston, et al. 2003:445).

Mummy Cases. In 1985 an Anglo-Dutch expedition excavating at Saqqâra, the mortuary for ancient Memphis, encountered a tomb that included coffins decorated with pseudo-glyphs that dated to between 1075-715 B.C., the Third Intermediate Period (Raven 1991). The tomb was identified as having belonged originally to Iurudef, servant to the brother-in-law of Ramses II. After the burial, the tomb was robbed during New Kingdom period. Then, sometime later, the chambers were repeatedly re-entered to deposit the bodies of approximately 70 individuals.

Shoddy mummification techniques and a paucity of grave goods identified this intrusive population as of a “quite humble social stratum” (Raven 1991:3). Physical-anthropological analysis of the bodies revealed a group of people whose livelihood required physical labor and whose quality of health was generally poor (Walker 1991:65). Of the 27 anthropoid wooden coffins, only one bore a legitimate burial text; two coffins were embellished with pseudo-hieroglyphic script and two lids were decorated with an “illegible, corrupt offering formulae” (Aston, et al. 1991:26-30). These two coffins represent the only fully provenieneced examples of artifacts bearing pseudo-hieroglyphs recovered from Egypt.
Burial 27 consisted of an anthropoid coffin decorated with polychrome paint and containing an elderly female. Pseudo-hieroglyphic text appeared on the sides and back of the coffin case as well as on the lid (Figure 257). On the coffin sides (Figure 258), square spaces were left blank for never-added text (described as "anepigraphic" by Aston, et al. 1991:26-27). Although this burial represented one of the most elaborate in the tomb, the condition of the body revealed that only a few days passed between death and interment. The corpse had been loosely wrapped in bandages with the bodily fluids and internal organs still intact (Walker 1991:70). Burial 54+64 consisted of a sub-adult male placed in an anthropoid coffin with pseudo-glyphs adorning the lid (Figure 259). Neither individual displayed any evidence of professional mummification (Walker 1991:74-75). Additional coffins with similar pseudo-hieroglyphic script were documented from excavations at el_Lahun (Petrie 1891), Sedment and el-Hibe (Raven 1991). The recovery of a glass eye-bead (diagnostic of the period between 1000-700 B.C.) suggests that these later burials dated to the Third Intermediate Period (Raven 1991:35).

Of the entire corpus of Egyptian pseudo-hieroglyphics, only the intrusive Third Intermediate Period coffins from the Ivurdef tomb complex are archaeologically provenienced. The combination of poor mummification techniques, paucity of grave goods, and osteology suggested that the interred were likely laborers of low social status. In his analysis of the burials, Raven (1991:3) speculated that the pseudo-hieroglyphs had been painted by illiterate provincial Memphis scribes for non-elites who could not appreciate fully-legible hieroglyphic text.
In all of the Egyptian examples, pseudo-glyphs coexisted with the established traditions of hieroglyphic writing. The pseudo-glyphs consisted of legitimate signs arranged into non-legible combinations; no new signs were created. Artifacts bearing pseudo-glyphs were presumed to have been purchased by illiterate Egyptians who either did not care, could not recognize or could not afford, real writing. Based on the number of artifacts recovered, it appears that buyers believed communication with the deities through the Horus Stelae and mummy cases was not compromised by the presence of non-legible pseudo-hieroglyphs — if, indeed, the buyers were able to recognize the difference.

Summary of Cross-cultural Comparisons

In the examples presented above, pseudo-glyphs were produced for an open market in which anyone with sufficient wealth could purchase objects adorned with writing. For the ancient Egyptians, as well as those embellishing artifacts with pseudo-Kufic, script continued to express prestige and power; however, “the evocation of writing’s potential presence evidently sufficed” (Houston, et al. 2003:445). As noted by Baines (1989:479), although “writing served important administrative functions, how far works of art meaningfully communicated with anyone beyond the gods is less clear.” By contrast, the makers of Tyrrhenian amphorae appear to have employed a more mercenary perspective in concluding that the gratuitous addition of Greek letters would confirm the vessels’ foreign origins and add to their perceived value.
Late Classic Period Maya ceramics adorned pseudo-glyphs derive from contexts that suggest different social goals. Pseudo-glyphs appear on small bowls that likely held corn-based comestibles consumed by a single individual. While it may be inferred that these vessels represent the drinking vessels of less elite individuals, deposition context tells us little about when the bowls were used or by whom. When broken, the bowls were thrown into middens and subsequently may have been employed as construction fill.

The presence of vases and plates decorated with pseudo-glyphs in the richest of Late Classic Period Maya elite tombs served to reiterate the relationships that united the ruler with members of his own and subsidiary communities. As noted by Costin (1999:85), the objects recovered from human burials comprise consciously constructed assemblages that form a deliberate statement of ideology, some of which is an ideology of the social order.