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## A CYLINDER SEAL FROM TLATILCO

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### ABSTRACT

A cylinder seal, apparently from the Olmec occupation at Tlatilco, is inscribed with what may be the oldest writing known from Mesoamerica. The writing system is unlike any previously known and is typologically more advanced than other Mesoamerican systems.

THE CYLINDER SEAL reproduced in the accompanying drawing and photograph (Fig. 1) was shown to me by Lee A. Parsons of the Milwaukee Public Museum, to which it belongs. It was found on the surface in the brick works at Tlatilco about 1948, by Frederick A. Peterson, and was rescued from certain destruction by the brick-workers. It had apparently fallen from a large clay lump which had been detached by the brick workers. Inside the lump was a type "D" figurine. This clearly suggests that the seal belongs to the so-called "Olmec" horizon at Tlatilco.

The length of the seal is 8.5 cm., and the diameter is 3.5 cm. The seal is in three registers with one end completely preserved and the other partly preserved. Unfortunately, part of one register is broken away. The other two are complete. All three registers clearly carry sequences of arbitrary symbols which are surely parts of a hitherto unknown writing system. I have not been able to distinguish top from bottom nor to determine direction of reading.

Except for the seal in Fig. 2 *a*, also said to have come from Tlatilco, this is the first clearcut evidence of writing from the Valley of Mexico. Chronologically, it may well be the earliest writing known from Mesoamerica. In a typological sense, insofar as it is possible to make such judgments about an undeciphered system, it seems more advanced than any of the other known Mesoamerican systems. Most notable is the complete absence of any recognizable pictographs. In later Mesoamerican systems, the three dots (:) would stand for the number three and the dotted cross (÷|÷) would stand for Venus, as it did among the Maya. These symbols, however, are also known in Old World scripts. By themselves, neither of them is adequate to connect this cylinder seal with any other writing system.

Comparative evidence on Preclassic writing in Mesoamerica is scanty. The only sizeable corpus of materials comes from the Zapotec area, principally from Monte

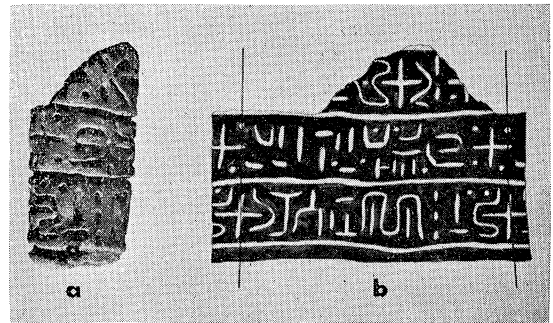


FIG. 1 [KELLEY]. Cylinder seal from Tlatilco, Mexico. *a*, photograph; *b*, roll-out drawing of seal impression. Milwaukee Public Museum Photograph.

Alban. It has been published and analyzed by Caso (1928, 1947). Zapotec glyphs show no important similarities to this cylinder seal. Some of the Zapotec inscriptions come from Monte Alban I, but I have been unable to determine how early writing appears in that long period. If writing goes to the beginning of the period, it might well be earlier than this seal, or of comparable age.

At Kaminaljuyu, a very fine Miraflores period monument has a fairly long inscription which may be in an early form of the later Mayan script (Girard 1962, Pl. 242). No other monuments with writing from this site clearly belong to the Preclassic; there are few of any date. At El Baul, the famous Stela 1 has writing but is, unfortunately, not certainly legible at some parts of the famous date and is almost completely illegible except for the date. The style is quite distinct from either Mayan or Zapotec. The date seems closer to Olmec dates, but there are differences, and the style of the accompanying figure is not Olmec.

A more Mayoid monument is Stela 1, Santa Margarita, Colomba, in Guatemala. This seems to have a simple version of the Mayan Initial Series Introducing Glyph followed by the number seven. Unfortunately, it is completely illegible below this and, hence, offers nothing of comparative value. At Chiapa de Corzo, the fragmentary Stela 1 (Lowe 1962: 192, Fig. 7) shows a standing figure in a near-Maya style and a clearcut use of place-value numerical notation. Of glyphs, only one calendar glyph survives. The style of the numerical notation is remarkably similar to that of Tres Zapotes Stela C. This latter monument has a late type of Olmec mask on it and another date. If it could be established definitely that El Baul Stela 1, Chiapa de Corzo Stela 1, and Tres Zapotes Stela C are dates counted from the same base as the later Mayan inscriptions, i.e. from 4 Ahau 8 Cumku, the monuments could be placed in time within a few years of each other, about two hundred years earlier than the earliest known Mayan monuments (Coe 1957). All, however, would seem to be late within the Olmec period. None contains enough legible glyphic material for a satisfactory analysis.

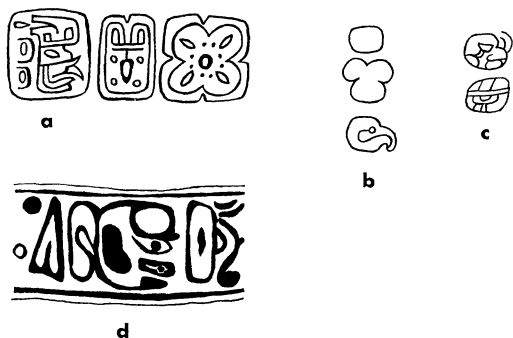


FIG. 2 [KELLEY]. Olmec texts. a, seal, Tlatilco; b, Monument 13, La Venta; c, pectoral, provenience unknown; d, cylinder seal 1, Chiapa de Corzo.

A still later continuation of an apparently Olmec writing tradition is to be found in the inscription of the Tuxtla statuette (Holmes 1907). This has not been published in its entirety since the original publication, despite its importance. The date is similar to those of Chiapa de Corzo Stela 1 and Tres Zapotes Stela C. The crudely incised glyphs show frequent repetitions and include human and probably animal heads. Some of the glyphs resemble Mayan glyphs, but I have been unable to recognize any obvious identities. The statuette itself shows a continuation of Olmec stylistic features, and for this reason one might expect a close resemblance to the supposedly Olmec cylinder seal being considered. The expectation is not borne out by the data, as the two seem markedly dissimilar.

Apart from these instances, I know of only four fairly clearcut examples of Preclassic writing, all reproduced in Fig. 2. Although all of them are very short, three of them are complete, and all of them show either animal or human heads as glyphs. A seal "from Tlatilco" without detailed provenience data (Fig. 2 a) has been published by Jose Louis Franco (1959, Fig. 1 c). He considers it to be Olmec writing, and I am inclined to agree. The three sequent symbols, however, might conceivably be merely an unusual form of decoration. None of the symbols is recognizable in other writing systems, and the character of the glyphs is very unlike those of the seal in Fig. 1.

Monument 13, from the Olmec type site of La Venta (Drucker 1952, Pl. 63) has three clear symbols which are probably hieroglyphs (Fig. 2 b). The absence of interior detail on two of the glyphs is surprising, but it does not seem to be due to weathering. The first glyph is also known in the Maya script and on the Tuxtla statuette. The third glyph seems to be a vulture (?) head, which is known as a Maya glyph. Association with a human figure suggests the possibility that this sequence may represent a name, or possibly a name and titles.

Kelemen (1956, Pl. 246 a) has published an Olmec pectoral, now in the British Museum. This small jade head is broken and contains traces of at least two glyphs,

now broken away, in addition to those still present. The simple incised glyphs (Fig. 2 c) seem rather similar to those of the Tuxtla statuette.

Finally, a cylinder seal from Chiapa de Corzo (Fig. 2 d) (Seal 1) has been published by Thomas Ferguson (1958: 22-5), with four others. He believes that all of them are writing, but I am extremely doubtful of the claims of the others. Ferguson quotes a letter from William F. Albright in which that distinguished authority on the ancient Near East declares that these symbols include "several clearly recognizable Egyptian hieroglyphs." One symbol, the triangle partly bisected at the base, is clearly identical in form with an Egyptian glyph. The element following is almost certainly a head, probably human, and quite stylized, with an additional element affixed. I do not know which of the other symbols are regarded by Albright as Egyptian hieroglyphs. If it is possible to make a plausible translation of the whole seal as Egyptian, I would be prepared to accept this statement, but on present evidence it seems to me that the elements are simple enough so that they afford no presumptive evidence of Egyptian influences by themselves. I am inclined to think that the seal is actually in some form of script, but I am not absolutely sure of that. The date given by Ferguson (1958: 51) is 300-500 B.C., apparently indicating an Escalera period date, or possibly a Francesca period date, both of which I would regard as approximately coeval with Olmec.

To me, the most striking thing about this material is its diversity. Scripts must have been much more widely used in perishable materials than is usually assumed. It is striking that all four of the Preclassic inscriptions of Fig. 2 show heads facing to the right. On the Tuxtla statuette and in the Maya script, heads normally face to the left. In Zapotec writing, heads may face in either direction but more commonly to the left. The complete absence of heads in the new inscription differentiates it from all other known Mesoamerican scripts. I have not been able to recognize affinities to any other script with which I am familiar either in the Old World or the New World.

*Acknowledgments.* I must thank Lee A. Parsons, of the Milwaukee Public Museum, who directed my attention to this seal, then photographed and drew it for me; to Dr. Borhegyi, Director of the Milwaukee Public Museum, for permission to publish the photograph and discussion; to Frederick A. Peterson for information about the discovery of the seal; and to Mrs. Marcia Cummings, who drew the inscriptions in Fig. 2 for me, I must also tender my thanks.

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## BURINS FROM LOUISIANA

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### ABSTRACT

Recently, four burins have been found at three sites near Catahoula Lake in southern LaSalle Parish, Louisiana. Burin types present include the polyhedral-dihedral burin, dihedral-angle burin, and a burin on a break. These burins are different in form and in associations from burins from Texas. They appear to be associated with Archaic Period material.

DURING THE SUMMER and fall of 1964, while undertaking a survey of Indian sites in LaSalle Parish, Louisiana, I discovered four burins on three sites along the Little River-Routh Creek drainage in southern LaSalle Parish. These specimens were sent to Jeremiah F. Epstein at the University of Texas in March, 1965, and were identified by him as burins.

These burins all occurred as surface finds from sites located on the dissected eastern terminus of the Catahoula Uplands near the southwestern shore of Catahoula Lake. Catahoula Lake is an ephemeral lake fed by a number of anastomosing bayous, and it is subject to flooding from the Mississippi River. Just north of the area concerned, a line of bluffs, which stands twenty to thirty feet above the level of the lake, marks the Mississippi Valley escarpment.

One burin (Fig. 1 *a*) was found at the Russell Landing site near the confluence of Little River and Catahoula Lake. It is a thick biface of mottled brownish chert. The back and sides of this burin are much battered, and it appears to have served also as a hammerstone. Epstein called this a "beautiful example of a dihedral-angle burin." This specimen is 4.9 cm. long, has a greatest width of 2.4 cm., and a burin spall scar 0.7 cm. long.

The other three burins came from two sites along

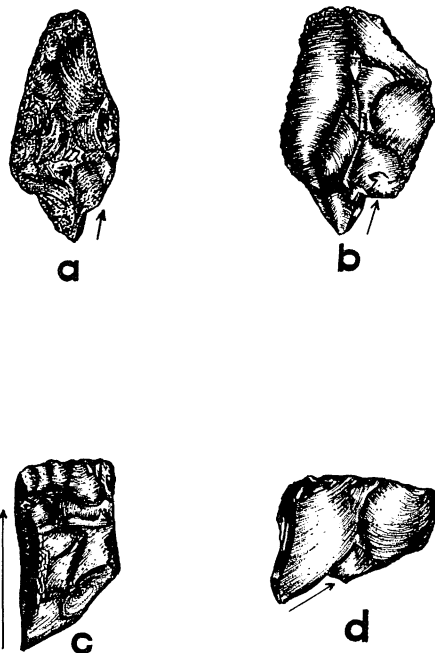


FIG. 1 [GIBSON]. Burins from LaSalle Parish, Louisiana. *a*, burin from the Russell Landing site; *b-c*, burins from Duck Slough site No. 3; *d*, burin from Duck Slough site No. 14. Arrows show direction and length of burin spalls. Length of *c*, 4 cm.

the Duck Slough fork of Routh Creek. There were fourteen of these small ridge sites in an area approximately one mile square, and all seem to have been parts of one large occupation. Two burins came from one ridge (No. 3) and another from a neighboring ridge (No. 14), about two hundred yards distant.

The two burins (Fig. 1 *b* and *c*) from ridge site No. 3 are examples of a polyhedral-dihedral burin and a burin on a break, respectively. The polyhedral-dihedral burin (Fig. 1 *b*) is made from an oval flake, 4.9 cm. long, 3.2 cm. wide, with the major burin spall scar 0.6 cm. long. This is an unusual specimen because the burin spall has been detached from the striking platform of the original flake. The edges of this artifact show many fine use scars such as would result from a scraping motion of the tool.

The burin on a break (Fig. 1 *c*) is also a biface and appears to have originally been a portion of the blade of a projectile point. This specimen, 4.0 cm. long and 2.0 cm. wide, has been formed by the intersection of two burin facets, one 2.9 cm. long, and the other 2.6 cm. long. Extensive usage scars are present on the burin edge and on the sides of the burin spall scars.

The fourth burin (Fig. 1 *d*), of banded red chert, came from a nearby ridge about two hundred yards from ridge site No. 3 and about three-quarters of a mile from the Russell Landing site. It is another polyhedral-dihedral