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PROJECT

Scripting Ritual: Classic Maya Religion and the Spread of Hieroglyphic Writing

This project offers a novel analysis of the relationship between religion, politics, and writing in ancient Mesoamerica, one of just four world regions where writing was invented independently. It examines the intersection of scribal and religious transmission among Classic Maya elites (250–900 CE), whose participation in joint rituals and the exchange of religious artifacts promoted cultural cohesion across a politically fragmented landscape.

In the region spanning parts of what are now Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, scholars have defined Classic Maya civilization according to a series of common cultural traits, including a hieroglyphic script. Rapid progress in hieroglyphic decipherment since the 1980s has fed a surge in studies of Classic Maya culture, economy, and politics that provide an ever-richer image of these dynamically interconnected, interdependent polities. All evidence indicates that Classic Maya society hosted a vibrant intellectual culture that included ritual practices, political ideologies, mathematical and astronomical study, artistic canons, and hieroglyphic literacy. Still, it remains unclear how these archaeologically ephemeral phenomena spread or how intellectual exchange intersected with politics, trade, or military encounters.

The project centers on two key questions: what role did religion play in the development of Maya hieroglyphic writing? And how did the Classic Maya maintain a coherent, mutually legible script in the absence of political unification? To explore these questions, the project uses epigraphic and iconographic analysis to reconstruct trajectories of hieroglyphic and religious transmission and to contextualize them within interactions across Classic Maya society more broadly. It also addresses the consequences of this Classic Maya case for understanding religious exchange as a social process that can foster, rather than just mirror, cultural and political integration.

Recommended Reading

- Matsumoto, Mallory E. (2022). "Letters of Conversion: Meta-alphabetic Discourse and Linguistic Participation in Colonial Highland Guatemala." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 32 (1): 28–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12309>.
— (2022). "Qualia of Proximity and Materiality in Classic Maya Hieroglyphs." *Signs and Society* 10 (1): 48–77. <https://doi.org/10.1086/717562>.
— (2023). "Cultures of Creativity: Hieroglyphic Innovation in the Classic Maya Lowlands." *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 33 (1): 99–118. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774322000208>.

Exogamy among the Classic Maya: Women, Politics, and Ritual Exchange

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOWS' LIBRARY

Matsumoto, Mallory (Cambridge, 2023)

"In the name of the (God)Father" : baptismal naming in early colonial Guatemala

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1850661618>

Matsumoto, Mallory (Cambridge, 2023)

Cultures of creativity : hieroglyphic innovation in the classic Maya lowlands

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1850655456>

Matsumoto, Mallory (Cambridge, 2023)

Sculptural traditionalism and innovation in the classic Maya kingdom of Sak Tz'i, Mexico

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1850649081>

Matsumoto, Mallory (Dordrecht [u.a.], 2022)

Archaeology and epigraphy in the digital era

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1850653615>

Matsumoto, Mallory (Malden, Mass., 2022)

Letters of conversion : meta-alphabetic discourse and linguistic participation in colonial highland Guatemala\$Mallory E. Matsumoto

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1850652511>

Matsumoto, Mallory (Chicago, Ill. [u.a.], 2022)

Qualia of proximity and materiality in classic Maya hieroglyphs

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1850632758>

Matsumoto, Mallory (Chicago, Ill., 2019)

Copying in clay : Maya hieroglyphs and changing modes of scribal practice

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1850635218>

Matsumoto, Mallory (Durham, NC, 2018)

"I saw their evil intent" : positioning the highland Maya in the moral hierarchy of a just conquest

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1850636826>

Matsumoto, Mallory (Chicago, 2017)

Land, politics, and memory in five Nija'ib' K'iche' títulos : the title and proof of our ancestors

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1010131826>

Matsumoto, Mallory (Durham, NC, 2016)

Recording territory, recording history : negotiating the sociopolitical landscape in colonial highland Maya títulos

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=185063369X>