

## I. Maya Glyphs at Piedras Negras

*The first Native Americans to become full-time farmers were the Mesoamericans. As sedentary people, they soon produced monumental architecture, a complex calendar system, and written histories. Because of this, we can still catch glimpses of their lives. In the year 711, for example, a Maya sculptor carved into a great flat stone (or stela, as archaeologists call it) a story that had come to be important to his people. On July 7, 674, a noble girl-child was born in a place called Man (pronounced “Mahn”), in the vicinity of her people’s highest-ranking line of chiefs, known as the Turtle lineage, whose seat was at today’s Piedras Negras, in Guatemala. She would later be called Lady Katun Ahau. When she was 12 years old, she was “adorned,” married to the heir apparent of Piedras Negras, Yo’ Achnal, who later became high chief. When she was 33, she gave birth to a daughter, Lady Kin Ahau. When Lady Katun Ahau had been queen for 24 years, she participated in a ceremony called “grasping the staff,” celebrating rulership. The current katun, or set of twenty 365-day years, ended 99 days later, in December of 711 in the Western calendar. As the scribe told the story of Lady Katun Ahau, he emphasized how worthy of homage was the young princess, Lady Kin Ahau, who was clearly poised to have an important role in the future.*

*We can read this history today because Maya scholars in the second half of the twentieth century dramatically succeeded in breaking the code embedded in the glyphs that cover the ancient ruins scattered throughout Mexico and Guatemala. It had long been thought that the glyphs made mystical references to the spiritual world, that is, that a particular sculptor represented the divinities he worshipped with pictures he and others in his world felt were fitting. Finally one scholar realized that certain glyphs commonly appeared as appendages (prefixes or affixes) and apparently had meanings like “in this place of —” or “it happened on —” or “became king of —.” The texts, then, were actual histories – tales of the real world, of kings and queens and wars. Later,*

other scholars who had a grasp of at least one Mayan language began to take seriously the idea that many of the main glyphs were phonetic, that certain images represented certain syllables. A colonial friar named Diego de Landa had asserted this in the sixteenth century and, using his examples to begin with, scholars began to make rapid progress. There now exists a nearly complete Maya syllabary.

As you look at this example of a translated text, try to participate in the scholarly sleuthing. After you see how numbers are represented, can you easily pick out other glyphs that contain numbers? See if you can identify symbols that are found in different glyphs – “lady,” “she was born,” “kin” (sun), “katun,” etc.

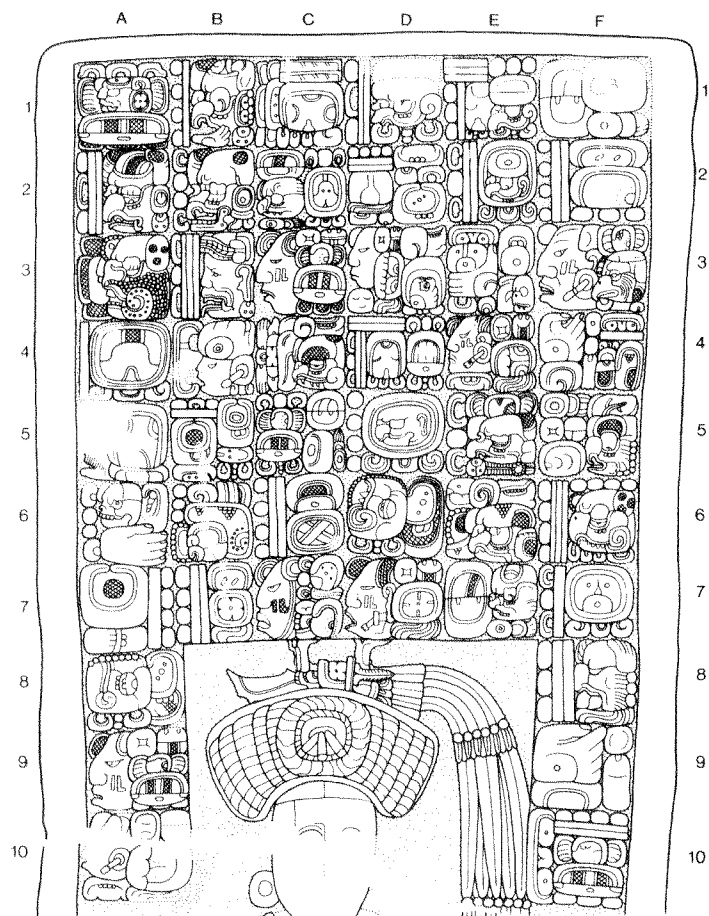


Figure 1.1.1 Maya Glyphs at Piedras Negras

A1	<i>tzic yaxkin</i> the count [date] is in yaxkin	C1	<i>mi, lubum uinicibi</i> 0 kins, 10 uinals	E1	<i>bolulum, uaxac uinicibi, ux tuni</i> 14 kins, 8 uinals, 3 tuns
B1	<i>bolon pib</i> 9 baktuns	D1	<i>labcham tuni</i> 12 tuns	F1	<i>ual ut</i> it came to pass
A2	<i>labcham katun</i> 12 katuns	C2	<i>ual ut bun chibin</i> it came to pass on 1 cib	E2	<i>buluch imix</i> on 11 imix
B2	<i>cha tun</i> 2 tuns	D2	<i>chanlabum uniu nauab</i> 14 kankin, she was adorned	F2	<i>chanlubum yaxkin</i> 14 yaxkin
A3	<i>mi uinic</i> 0 uinals	C3	<i>na kutum ahau</i> Lady Kutun Ahau	E3	<i>u ch'amua lom</i> she grasped the staff
B3	<i>buluch kin</i> 11 kins	D3	<i>nana man ahau yichnal</i> matron of Man	F3	<i>na katun ahau</i> Lady Katun Ahau
A4	<i>bo chibin</i> 5 cib	D4	<i>makina yo' acnal</i> Great Sun Yo'	E4	<i>nana man ahau</i> matron from Man
B4	<i>nab</i> Seventh Lord of the Night	C4	<i>lubum, buluch uinicibi bun tuni</i> 10 kins, 11 uinals, 1 tun	F4	<i>homi u bo tun</i> it ended, the fifth tun
A5	<i>ch'a bun</i> tied on the headband	D5	<i>chan chamal</i> on 4 cimi	E5	<i>hun katun lati</i> 1 katun after
B5	<i>uac kal buliy</i> 27 days after [the moon] arrived	C5	<i>chanlabum icat</i> 14 uo	F5	<i>ti abuale yo'</i> his kingship, Yo' acnal
A6	<i>cha tzuc u</i> two moons are worn out	D6	<i>sibi</i> she was born	E6	<i>bolonlubum, chan uinicibi</i> 19 kins, 4 uinals
B6	<i>ux sac uitz ku</i> Three White Mountain God <sup>1</sup>	C6	<i>na bun tan ac</i> she, cherished one of the Turtle lineage	E7	<i>ual ut</i> it came to pass
A7	<i>unic bolon</i> 29 days	D7	<i>na kin ahau</i> Lady Kin Ahau	F7	<i>uac ahau</i> on 7 ahau
B7	<i>chanlubum yaxkin</i> 14 yaxkin			F8	<i>uxlubum muan</i> 13 muan
A8	<i>sibi</i> she was born			F9	<i>homi</i> it ended
A9	<i>na katun ahau</i> Lady Katun Ahau			F10	<i>u chanlubum katun</i> its fourteenth katun
A10	<i>nana man ahau</i> matron (noblewoman) from Man				

Source: Linda Schele's translation of Stela 3, Piedras Negras, Guatemala, in Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code* (Thames & Hudson, 1992), pp. 266–7, courtesy of Thames & Hudson.

Study: Linda Schele and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (William Morrow, 1990).

Further exploration: Students who wish to launch themselves into the study of the Maya glyphs should begin with Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone, *Reading the Maya Glyphs* (Thames & Hudson, 2001). A classic article that became a touchstone in the development of the field and demonstrates how scholars developed the syllabary is David Stuart, “Ten Phonetic Syllables,” *Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing* 14 (1987).

<sup>1</sup> This is probably the name of the lunation.