

Subject: **Ancient Scripts and Languages**

Article: **36**

Olmec, Toltec and Maya

Doç. Dr. Haluk Berkmen

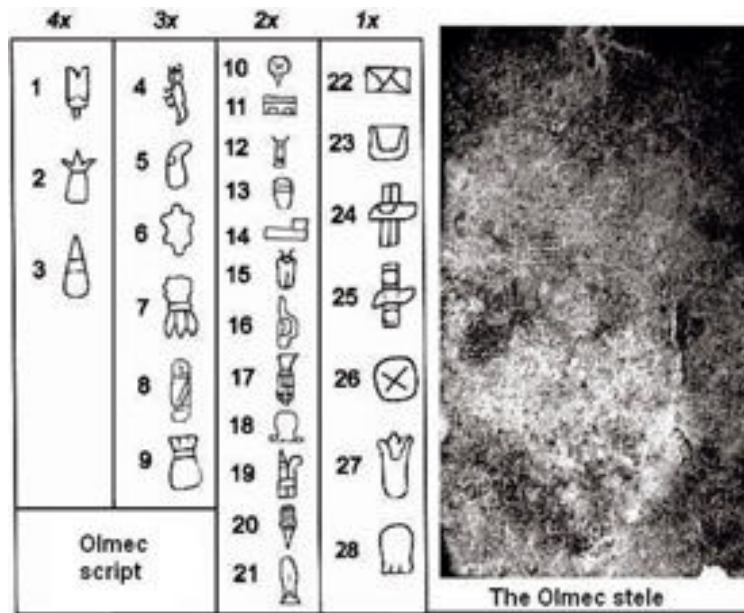
Few years ago in Cascajal, a Southern Mexican archeological site, a serpentine bloc has been found with a hitherto unknown pictographic script (1). The article reports:

Previously, no script has been associated unambiguously with the Olmec civilization, in many respects the progenitor of all later complex societies in adjacent Central-America (2).

The location of the ancient Olmec, Toltec and Maya civilizations is shown in the map below.



The Cascajal site consisted of two parallel mounds, dating from late first millennium BC. The inscribed block weighs about 12 kg and measures 36X21X13 cm. On the flat side a script consisting of 62 signs has been carved. The picture below-right shows the photograph of the stele and on the left we see signs that appeared four times, three times, two times and once on the block. We can therefore conclude that the script contains at least 28 characters and can be classified as an alphabet whose letters are both pictures and seals.



This alphabet is as old as the cuneiform Ugaritic alphabet (see Chapter 20, **The Ugaritic Script**). This can be ascertained from several artifacts found in the Cascajal site dated from 1200 BC up to 900 BC. The script had certainly a prior period of development and did not pop up suddenly. The Olmec alphabet contains some vegetal signs as well as some signs reminding the Central Asiatic seals, such as the ones numbered 10 and 26. The text is horizontal and contains groupings of long and short glyphs conforming to all expectations of writing. With such characteristics it can take its place among the world's first alphabets. But more specimens are needed for its decipherment (3).

The nearby city Tula is accepted as the ancient site of the Toltec culture (see map above). Statues with feather headdresses found in Tula remind us the Central Asiatic shamans of Tuva. The similarity of Tula with Tuva and the pyramids built by the Toltecs are indications of their Asiatic origin (4).



No written tablet has been found in the Toltec land, but the Maya people living in Yucatan developed a complicated pictographic writing system. It is most probable that the Maya glyphs originated from the simpler Olmec writing system. The Maya writing system is much more complex and gave a lot of headache to the Mayan scholars. This transformation from simple to complicated signs reminds us what happened to the Sumerian script and to the early Chinese script (see Chapter 13, **Evolution of Writing Systems**).

The Maya system contains several glyphs that stand for syllables and also many glyphs representing words. Therefore, this system is both syllabic as well as logographic. There are more than 1000 different glyphs in the Maya writing system. The Maya also mastered

astronomy, mathematics, art and architecture, and had a rather complicated calendar. They wrote on stone, ceramics, and bark paper. Unfortunately most of the Maya books were destroyed by the Spanish Bishop Diego de Landa.

It is believed that the Maya language developed from Proto-Mayan dating from minimum 2,000 BC. It then diffused into several branches known as **Yucatecan, Huastecan, Cholan, Qhanjobalan, Mamean and Quechuan**. All these Mayan dialects are agglutinative languages and can be shown to pertain to the Asiatic, Altaic language group. Here are some Maya words which are very similar to Turkish. The Maya word is given in bold and the corresponding Turkish word is in red within brackets (5).

Leader: Ahau (Agha), Ax: Baat (Balta), Servant, Low: Ashac (Uşak, Aşağı), A lot, Strong: Tchac (Çok), Pine tree: Tcha (Çam), Difficult: Tchetun (Çetin), Augment, Climb: Tchich (Çık), Left handed: Tchol (Çolak, Solak), Boulder: Kaa (Kaya), Bird: Kutz (Kuş), Inside: İçil (İçinde), Female: İş (Dişi), Belt: Kaşnak (Kasnak), Day: Kin (Gün), Sun: Kiniş (Güneş), Person: Kişe (Kişi), Old man: Koça (Koca), Slave: Kul (Kul), Mother: Naa (Ana), Be: Ol (Ol), Stay clean: Tamazkal (Temiz-kal), Inundation: Tosh (Taşkın), Hill: Tepek (Tepe), Stone: Tetl (Taş), Gather: Top (Topla), Dust: Toz (Toz), Full: Tul (Tolu, Dolu), Filled: Tulan (Dolgun), Deep: Tup (Dip), Pebble: Tzekel (Çakıl), Scabies: Ueez (Uyuz), Urinate: Uiş (İşe), Reach: Ul (Ulaş), Bore: Uy (Oy), Humid: Yash (Yaş), Green: Yashil (Yeşil). Summer: Yashkin (Yaz-günü).

These 37 words form a small sample indicating the relationship of the main Maya **Yucatec** language with Turkish. Since there have been no physical interaction in the last two millennia between Asiatic Turks and Central American Maya, these words cannot be loanwords. They have to stem from a common root language, which I have labeled as the Proto-language.

The Maya people have also built several pyramids on the Yucatan peninsula. These structures have striking similarities to the Sumerian ziggurats. Below the Sumerian ziggurat of the city Ur is compared with a Maya pyramid.



LEFT: The present view of the UR ziggurat.
CENTER: Reconstruction of its original form.
RIGHT: The Maya pyramid from Chiken Itza.

References

- (1) **The Olmecs: America's First Civilization**, R. A. Diehl, Thames & Hudson, London, 2005.
- (2) **Oldest Writing in the New World**, Science Magazine, 15 Sept. 2006, page 1610.
- (3) **National Geographic News**, Mason Inman, 14 September 2006.
- (4) Ref. 4 of Chapter 7, page 268.
- (5) **Geolinguistics** (in Turkish), Saim Ali Dilemre,