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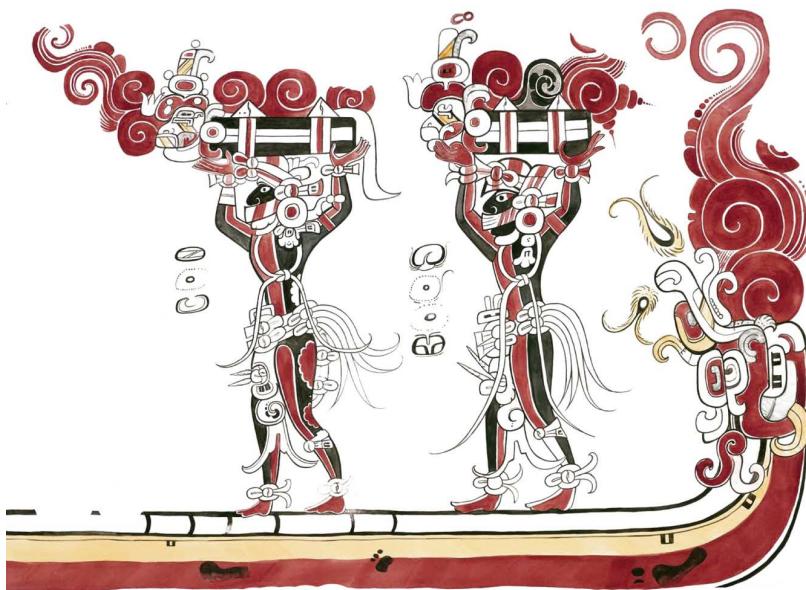
# Origins and Development of the Classic Maya Syllabary

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Workshop Leaders:  
Marc Zender, Tulane University  
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Portion of North Wall Mural of the Pinturas Structure, San Bartolo, Guatemala (Heather Hurst)

## Origins and Development of the Classic Maya Syllabary

'The Classic Maya Syllabary' — these words have a deceptively unitary connotation, as if there was only one set of syllabic signs valid in all times and places. Yet Maya hieroglyphic writing was in use for almost two millennia (from ca. 400 B.C. to A.D. 1565). Like all writing systems, the Maya script underwent numerous formal and structural changes during that considerable time span.

Recently, Alfonso Lacadena (2005) has argued that the syllabary's core elements may have been borrowed from an earlier writing system, perhaps one used to record a Mixe-Zoquean language. This proposal remains somewhat uncertain, for the early writing system in question has yet to be documented, yet there remain strong reasons to suspect that a significant portion of the earliest Maya syllabic signs do indeed have a non-Mayan origin. For one thing, as Lacadena (2005) has noted, several visually-related syllables all lack Mayan etymologies and are thus particularly good candidates for loan signs, perhaps from a Mixe-Zoquean continuum. For another, several iconically-transparent signs—such as the **a** 'parrot', **e** 'toad' and **u** 'shark'—cannot presently be explained by recourse to either Mayan or Mixe-Zoquean linguistic resources. Potentially, these signs and others like them were derived from some as-yet-unidentified earlier culture speaking a different, non-Mayan language.

Nonetheless, numerous new signs were added over the centuries (see Grube 1989), initially via the acrophonic reduction of Maya word signs (see Campbell 1984)—explaining the production of syllables like **ch'o** and **k'u** from earlier word signs like **CH'O'** 'rat' and **K'U'** 'nest'. Later, documented sound changes in the Classic Mayan language seem to have resulted in the abbreviation of still other Classic Mayan word signs into phonetic syllables. Perhaps the best attested changes are the loss of vowel length and the reduction of the *h/j* contrast at about A.D. 750, which seem to have led directly to the reduction of word signs like **BAAH** 'gopher' and **TAJ** 'torch' to the phonetic signs **ba** and **ta**.

In this hands-on workshop, students will use select Preclassic, Early Classic and Late Classic Maya texts, as well as dictionaries of Mayan and non-Mayan languages, to explore the origins and development of the Classic Maya syllabary.

### Select References

Campbell, Lyle

1984 The Implications of Mayan Historical Linguistics for Glyptic Research. In J. Justeson and L. Campbell, eds., *Phoneticism in Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing*, pp. 1-16. Albany: SUNY.

Grube, Nikolai

1989 Observations on the History of Maya Hieroglyphic Writing. In V. Fields, ed., *Seventh Palenque Round Table, 1989*, pp. 177-186. Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute.

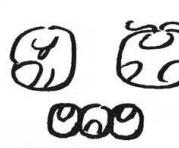
Lacadena, Alfonso

2005 Historical Implications of the Presence of non-Mayan Linguistic Features in the Maya Script." In L. van Broekhoven, et al eds., *The Maya and their Neighbors: Internal and External Contacts Through Time*, pp. 29-39. Verlag Anton Saurwein.

## A Classic Maya Syllabary (by David Stuart)

This chart is intended for general use in study or in teaching. Please do not publish without permission.

The chart displays the principal variants of certain syllable signs. Due to space constraints it omits some less common or obscure variants and forms. All drawings are by Stuart and more-or-less conform to the style and paleography used by Maya scribes in the Late Classic period, around 700 A.D.

	,	b'	ch	ch'
a				
e				
i				
o				
u				

	h	j	k	k'
a				
e				
i				
o				
u				

	l	m	n	p
a				
e				
i				
o				
u				

	s	t	t'	tz
a				
e				
i				
o				
u				

	tz'	w	x	y
a				
e				
i				
o				
u				

## A Postclassic Nahuatl Syllabary

Cross-culturally, phonetic signs tend to be generated by a process called acrophony, whereby the first sound/syllable of a word is extracted for use as a sign. (Compare our own letter **A** from 'alp, the Proto-Semitic word for 'ox', or the Mayan sign **bi** from *bih* 'road'.) Unlike the Maya syllabary, the origin of each and every one of the syllabic signs below can be explained on the basis of Nahuatl vocabulary (see the following pages).

	a	e	i	o
ch				
k				
kʷ				
m				
n				
p				
s				
t				
tl/l				
tz				
w				
x				

Based on the work of Alfonso Lacadena, with additions by Albert Davletshin and Marc Zender

	i							
	e							
	a							
	p				t	tl/l	w	x

	i							
	e							
	a							
			ch	k	kw	m	n	

The Lexical Origins of the Nahuatl Syllabary (per entries in Molina's dictionary)

1. Root identity — (C)V < (C)V

11

<b>a</b>	<	ā·tl	<b>i<sub>1</sub></b>	<	i
<b>e</b>	<	e·tl	<b>kʷa<sub>1</sub></b>	<	cuā
<b>me</b>	<	me·tl	<b>kʷa<sub>2</sub></b>	<	cuā
<b>mi</b>	<	mī·tl	<b>so</b>	<	*zō
<b>te<sub>2</sub></b>	<	te·tl	<b>pi<sub>1</sub></b>	<	pi
<b>xo</b>	<	*xo-			

2. Root with final nasal — (C)V < (C)VN

11

<b>ka<sub>2</sub></b>	<	cam(a)·tl	<b>na</b>	<	nān·tli	<b>tla/la</b>	<	tlan·tli
<b>ke</b>	<	quēm·itl, -quēn	<b>pa</b>	<	pān·tli	<b>tzo</b>	<	tzon·tli
<b>ko</b>	<	cōm·itl, -cōn	<b>se</b>	<	cen·tli	<b>xa</b>	<	xām(i)·tli, -xān
<b>mo</b>	<	mōn·tli	<b>te<sub>1</sub></b>	<	tēn·tli			

3. Root with medial or final glide (l/tl, w, i/y, h) — (C)V < (C)VG

11

<b>chi</b>	<	chian·tli	<b>o</b>	<	oh·tli	<b>si<sub>2</sub></b>	<	cil·in
<b>kʷa<sub>3</sub></b>	<	cuahu(i)·tl	<b>pe</b>	<	petl(a)·tl	<b>ti</b>	<	tīlan(a)
<b>kʷe</b>	<	cuē(i)·tl	<b>pi<sub>2</sub></b>	<	pīl-	<b>wa<sub>2</sub></b>	<	huāuh·tli
<b>ma</b>	<	mā(i)·tl	<b>si<sub>1</sub></b>	<	cih·tli			

4. Reduplicated root — C<sub>1</sub>V<sub>1</sub> < C<sub>1</sub>V<sub>1</sub>C<sub>1</sub>V<sub>1</sub>(C<sub>2</sub>)

06

<b>cho</b>	<	chohchoc?	<b>to</b>	<	tōtō·tl, tōtol·in	<b>we<sub>1</sub></b>	<	huēhuē·tl
<b>ne</b>	<	nene·tl	<b>wa<sub>1</sub></b>	<	huahuan(a)	<b>we<sub>2</sub></b>	<	huēhuēh

5. Root with medial or final k — C<sub>1</sub>V<sub>1</sub> < C<sub>1</sub>V<sub>1</sub>k(V<sub>1</sub>)

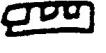
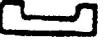
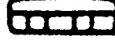
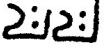
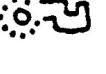
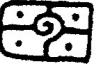
04

<b>ka<sub>1</sub></b>	<	cac·tli	<b>sa</b>	<	zaca·tl
<b>po</b>	<	pōc·tli	<b>wi</b>	<	vic·tli

## An Isthmian Syllabary (after Kaufman and Justeson 2002)

	i	e	^	a	u	o
p						
t						
tz						
k						
7						
s						
j						
m						
n						
w						
y						

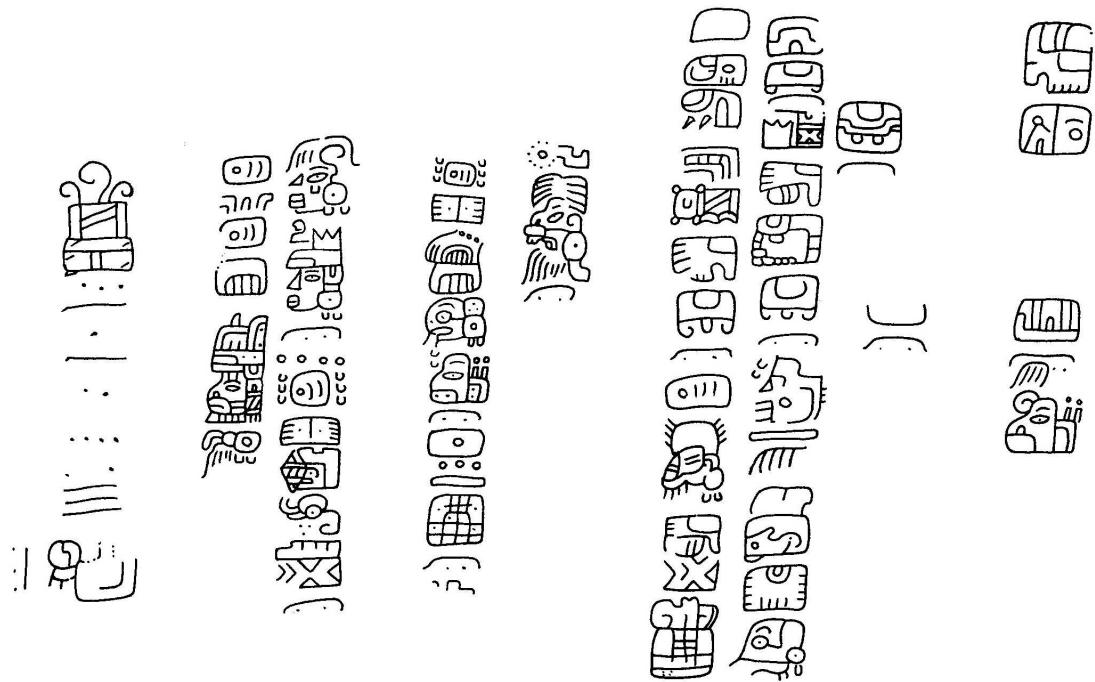
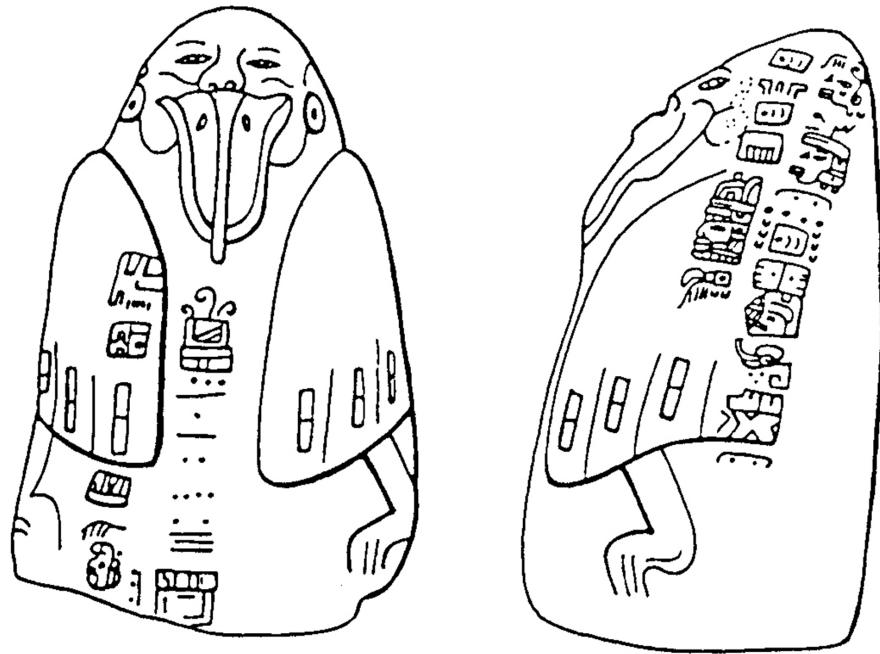
## A Selection of Isthmian Logograms (from Kaufman and Justeson 2002)

				
Kajaw 'jaguar'	7 owa 'macaw'	tuki 'turtle'	ni?jup. 'body-wap'	tuku? 'cloth', 'clothing'
				
? aw 'mouth'	nu?pin 'blood'	naka 'hide, skin'	kan 'penis'	?ips 'twenty'
				
suw 'sun'	matza? 'star'	nas 'earth'	kotzuk 'mountain'	tzap 'sky'
				
tuj? 'rain'	poy?a '20-day month/ moon'	?ame?/ kowa 'year/ drum'	jama 'day'	ko.yuml 'lord, boss'
				
ju?tz 'to pierce'	'to appear'	'sacrifice'	'offering'	'wik to sprinkle'
				
(yak) tokoy 'to lose'	jama 'animal guise'	wan 'to sing'	ki?m 'to go up'	nip? 'to plaint', 'to bury'
				
'king'	'throne'	'priest', 'shaman'	X-tl 'Now'	dem+se+?uk 'and then'

**La Mojarrá Stela 1** (drawing by George Stuart)



The Tuxtla Statuette (drawings by Stephen Houston)



## A Selection of Preclassic Maya Texts

San Bartolo, Guatemala (all drawings by David Stuart)



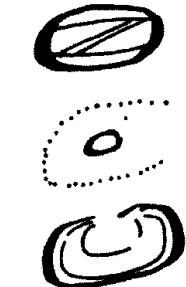
'Beltran' Block



West Wall Caption



North Wall Caption



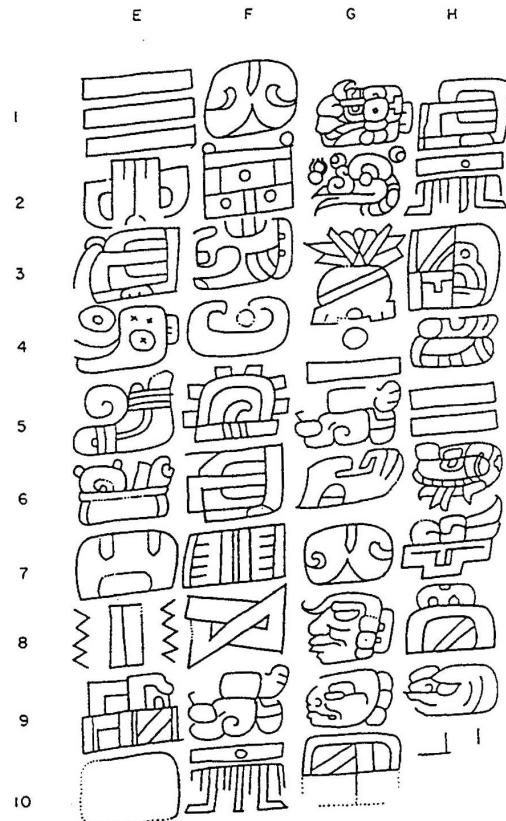
North Wall Caption

## A Selection of Preclassic Maya Texts (cont'd)

Kaminaljuyu Stela 10



(David Mora-Marin)



(Federico Fahsen)

## A Selection of Preclassic Maya Texts (cont'd)

Two Unprovenanced Pieces (drawings by David Mora-Marin)

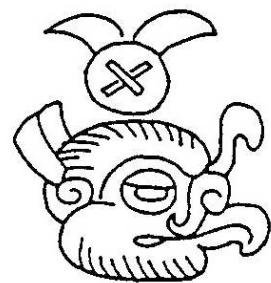


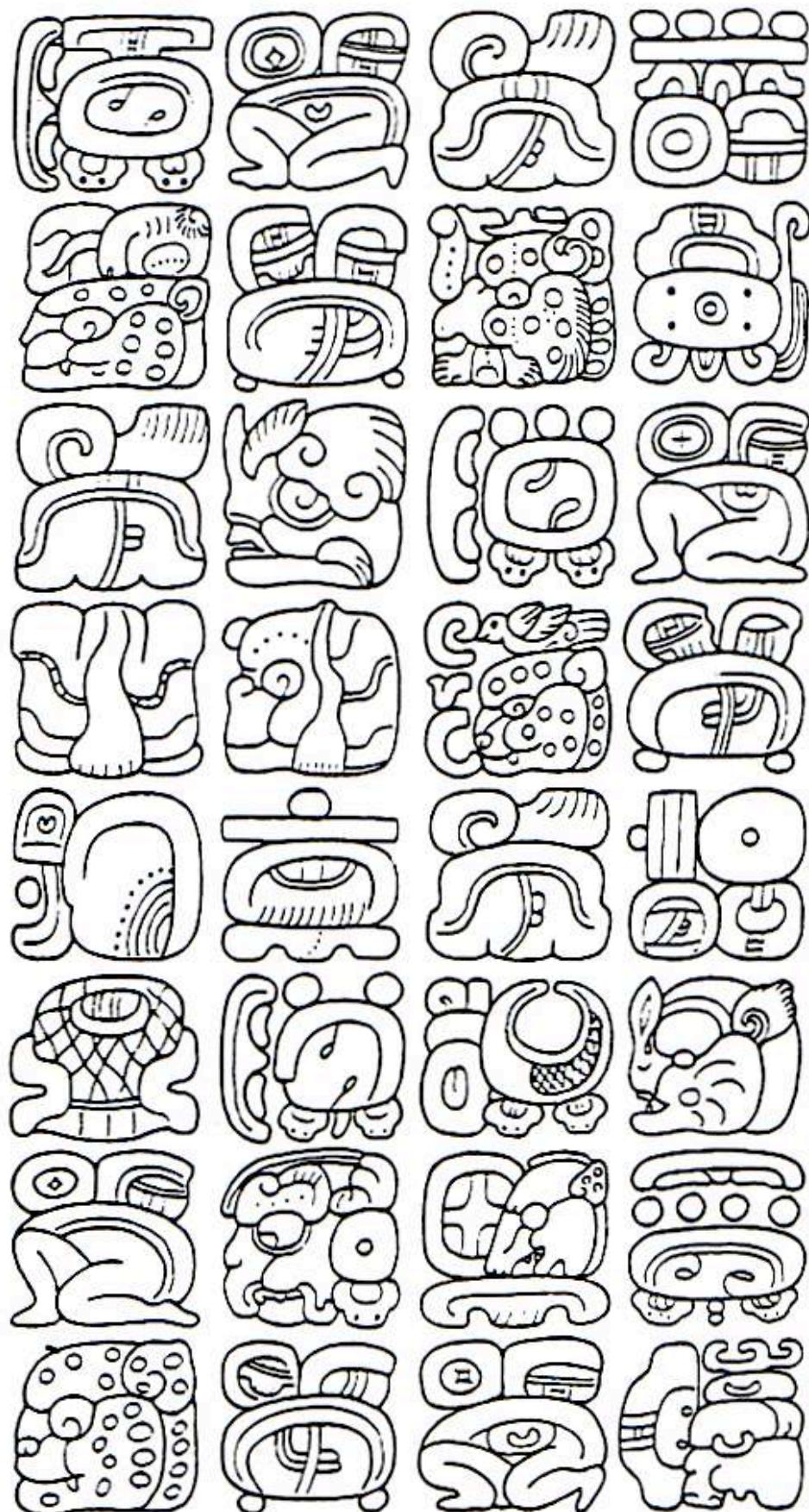
Unprovenanced Clamshell

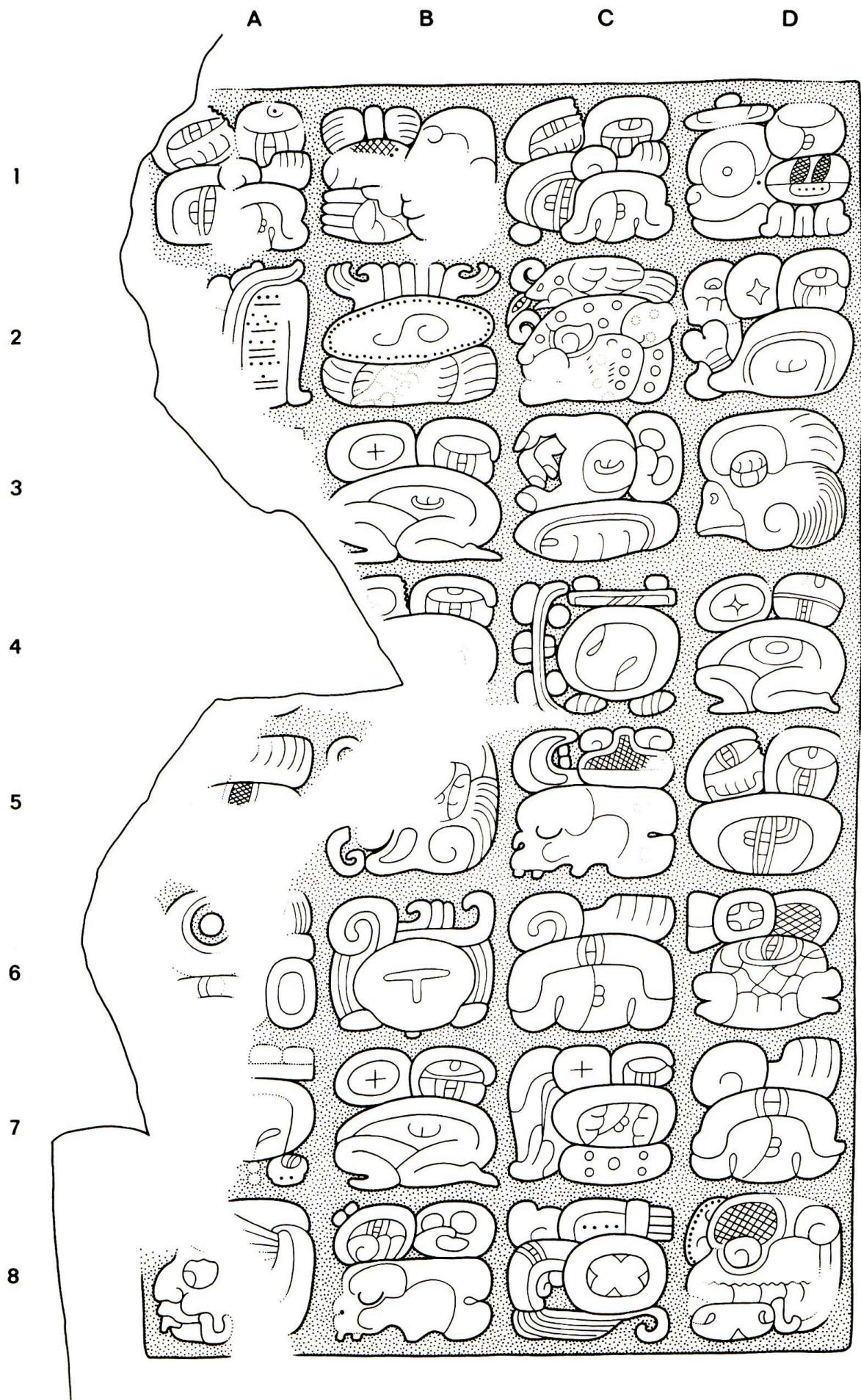
Unprovenanced Statuette  
(Peabody Museum, Yale University)

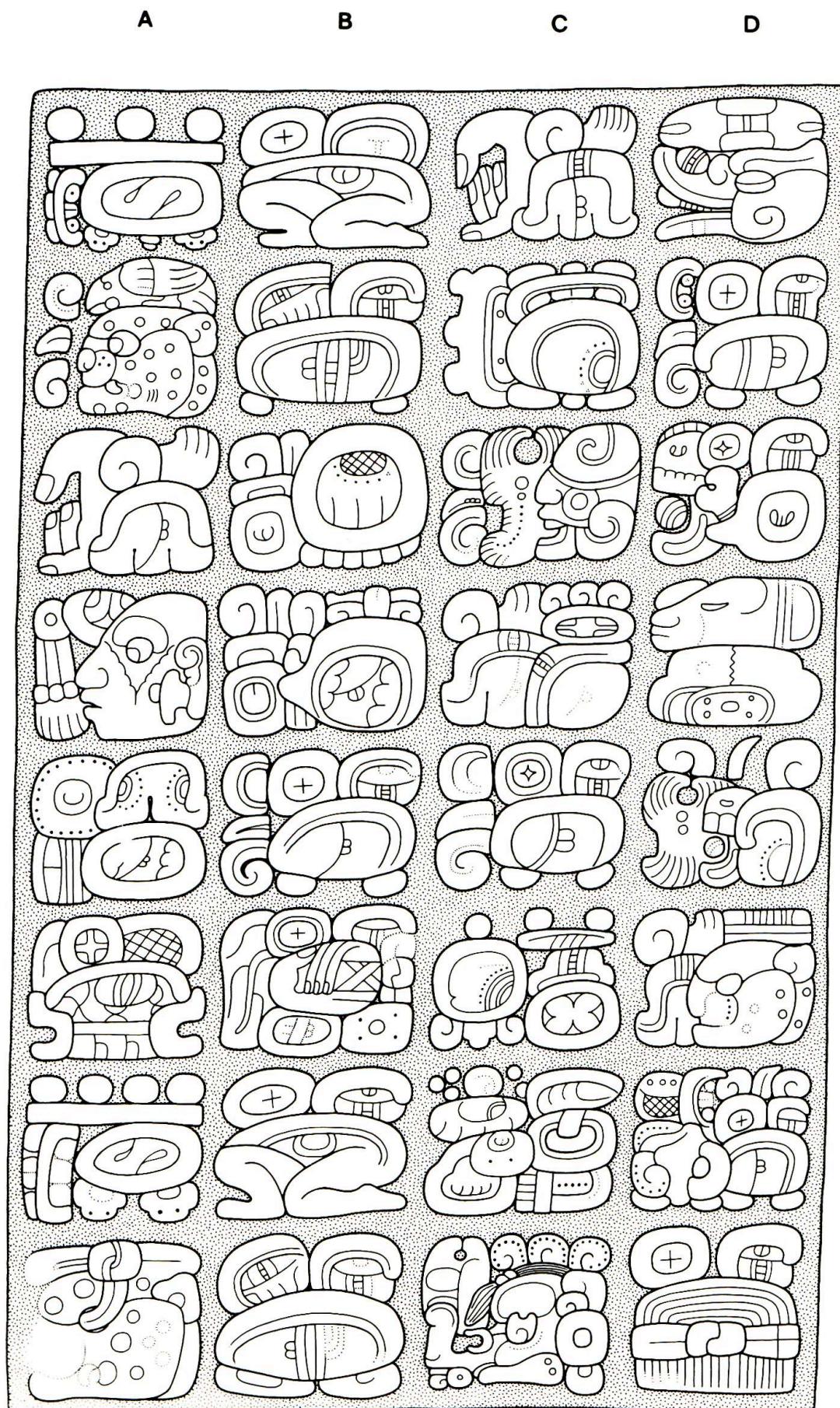
## A Selection of Preclassic Maya Texts (cont'd)

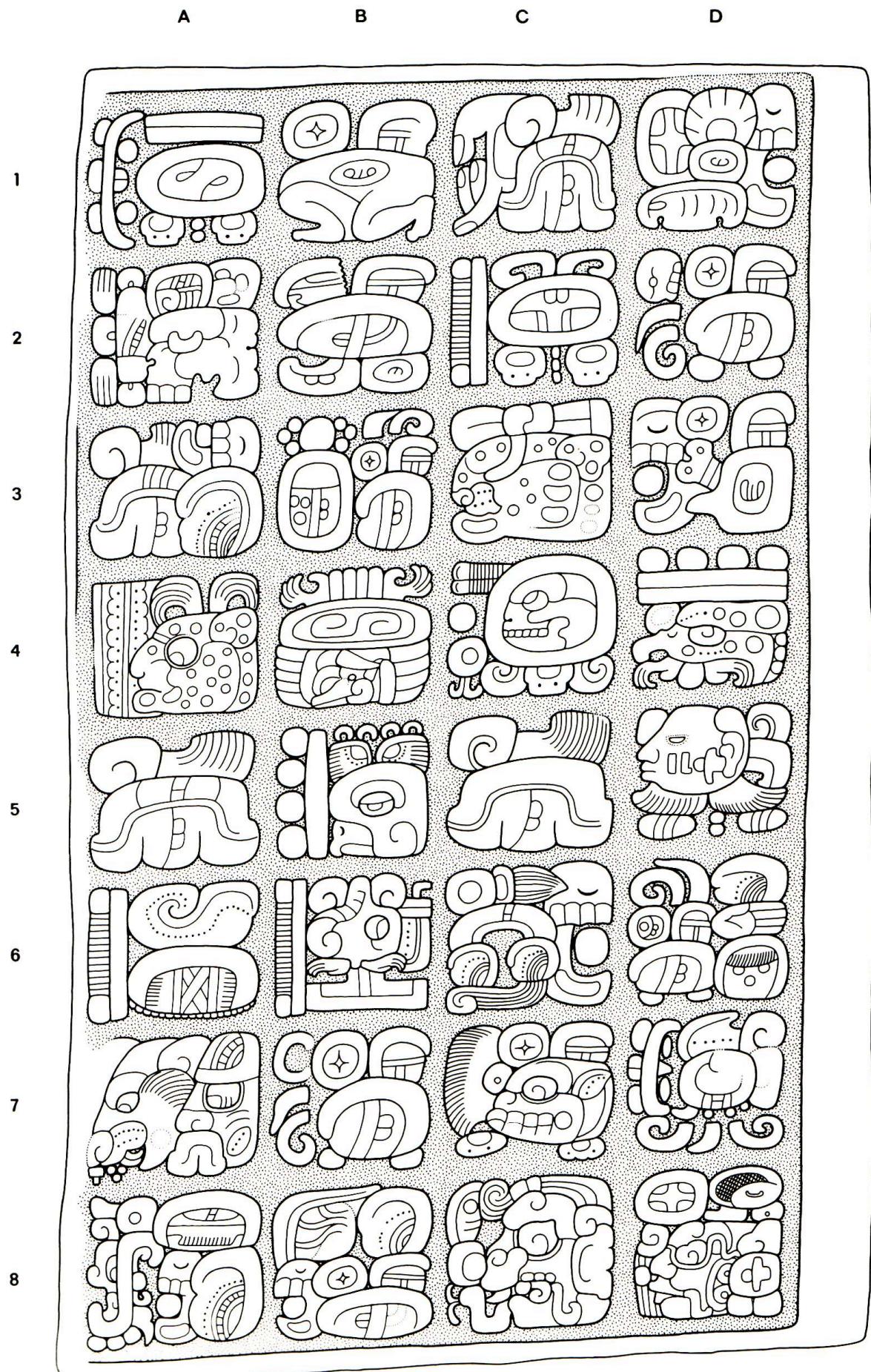
The Dumbarton Oaks Pectoral (drawings by Linda Schele)





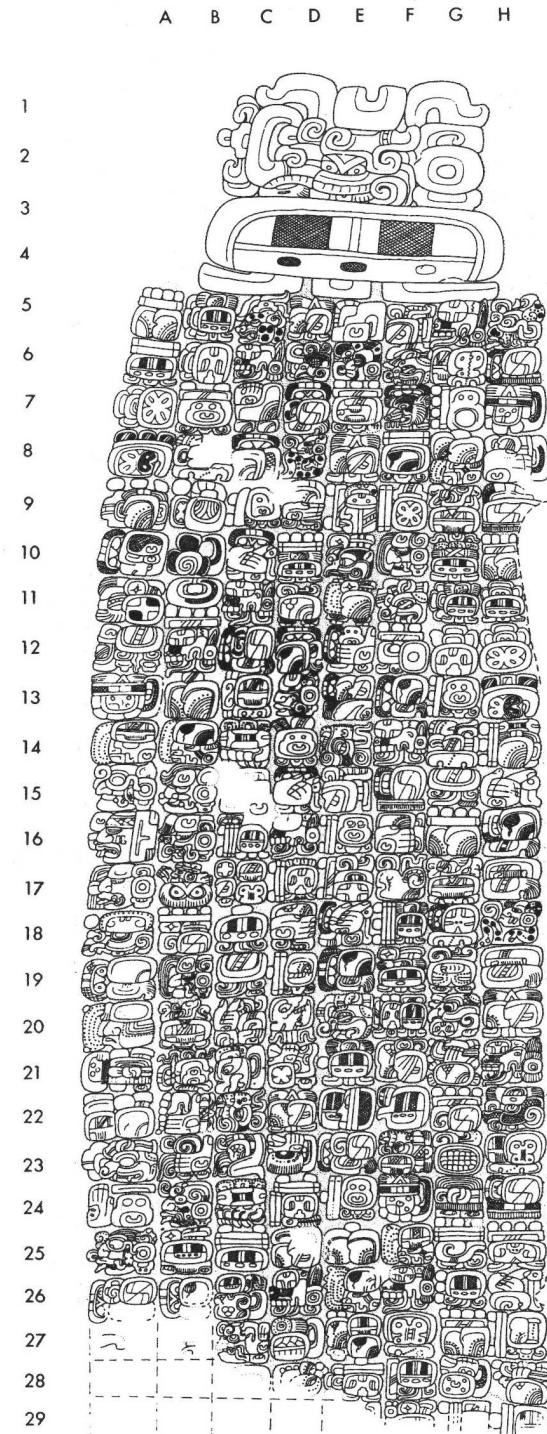
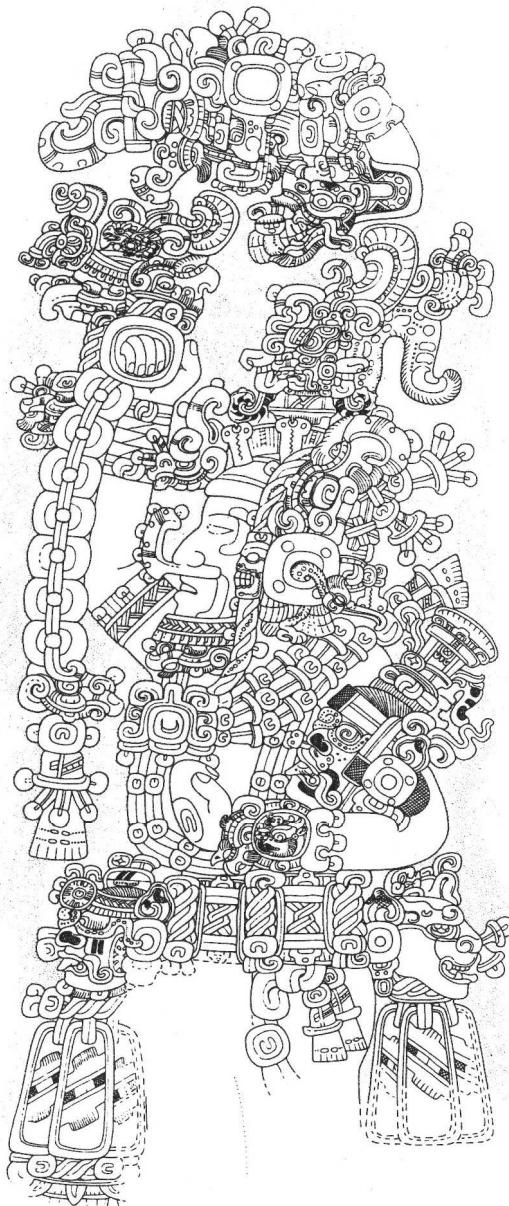




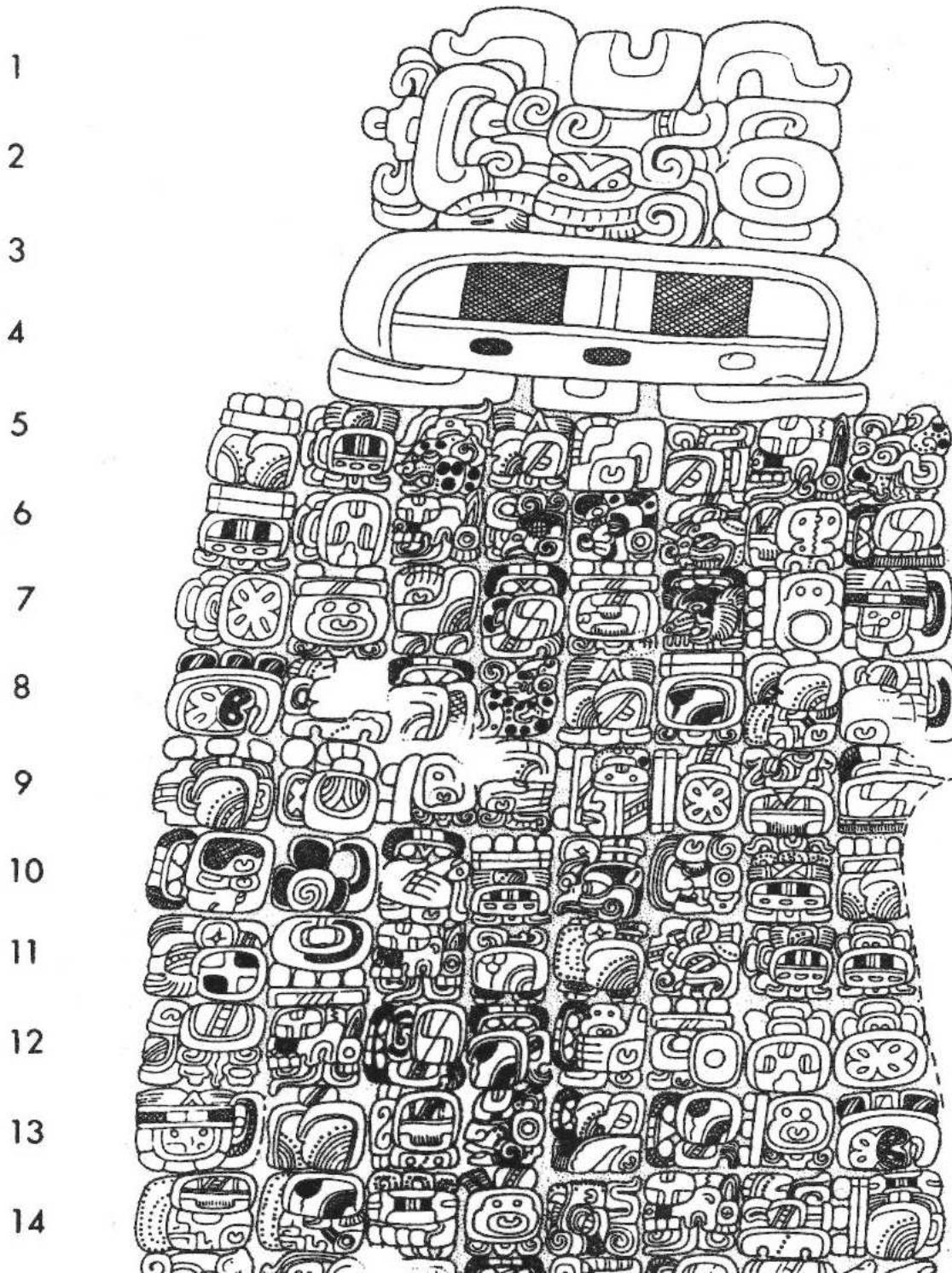


## A Selection of Early Classic Maya Texts

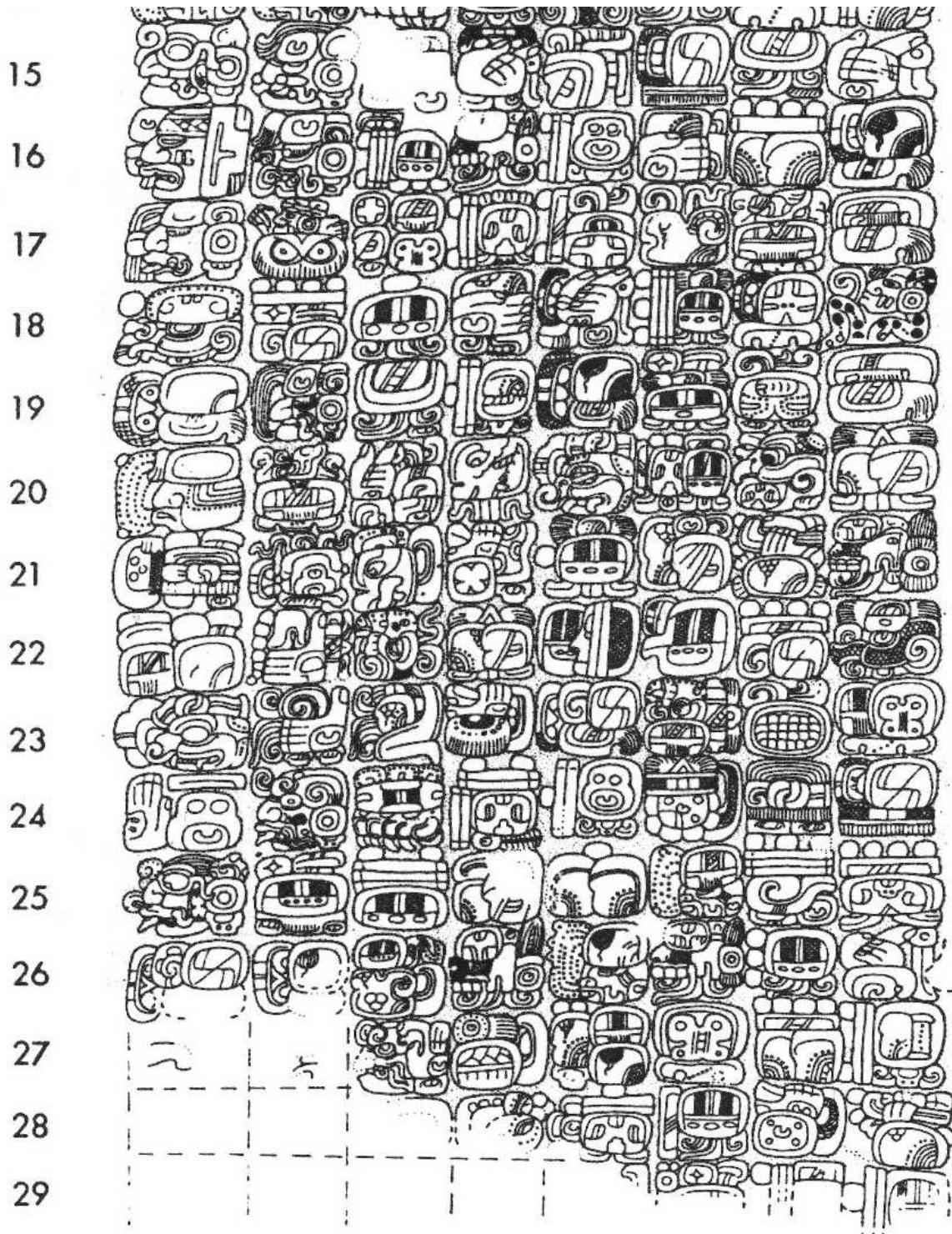
Tikal Stela 31 (all drawings by William R. Coe)



A B C D E F G H



A      B      C      D      E      F      G      H



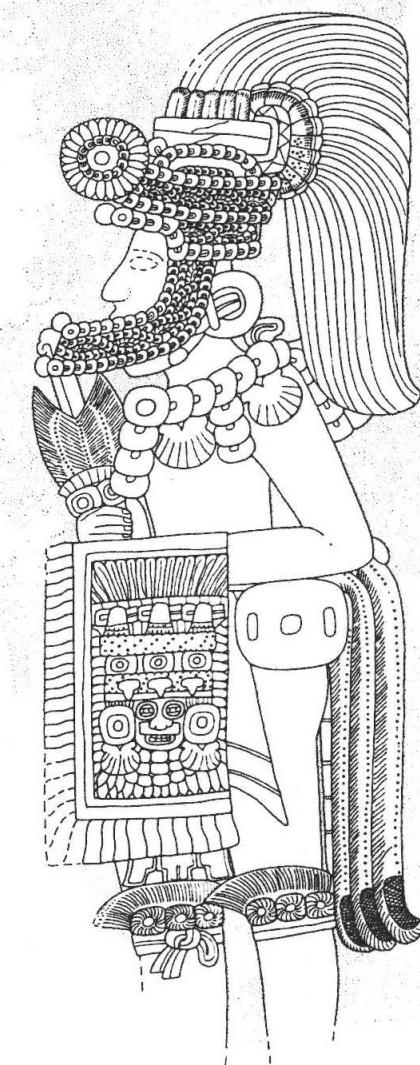
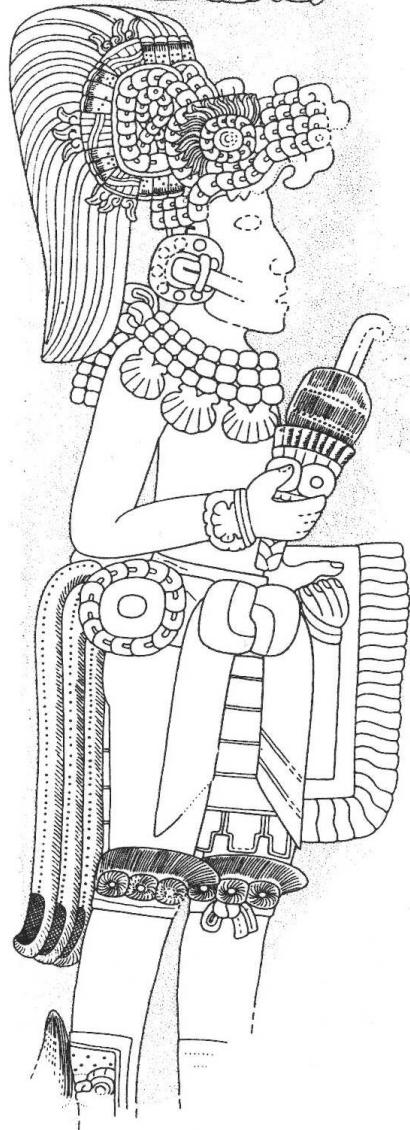
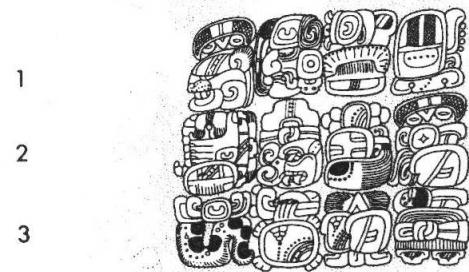
## A Selection of Early Classic Maya Texts (cont'd)

Tikal Stela 31, left and right sides

I J K L



M N O P



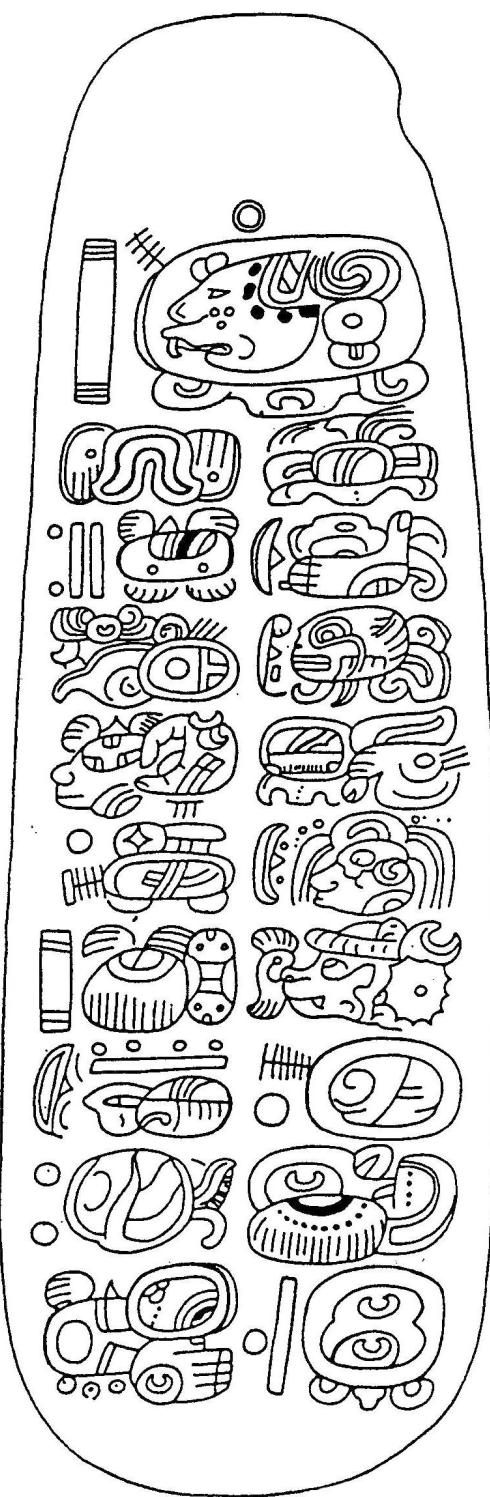
## A Selection of Early Classic Maya Texts (cont'd)

Leiden Plaque (drawing by Linda Schele)



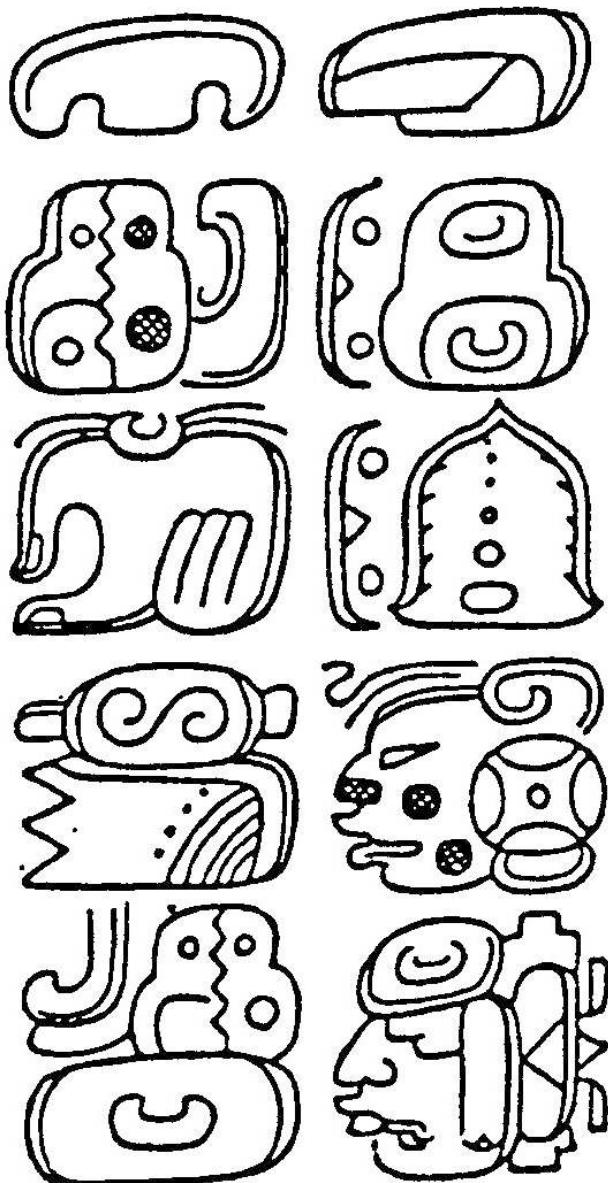
## A Selection of Early Classic Maya Texts (cont'd)

Unprovenanced Jade Celt (drawing by John Montgomery)

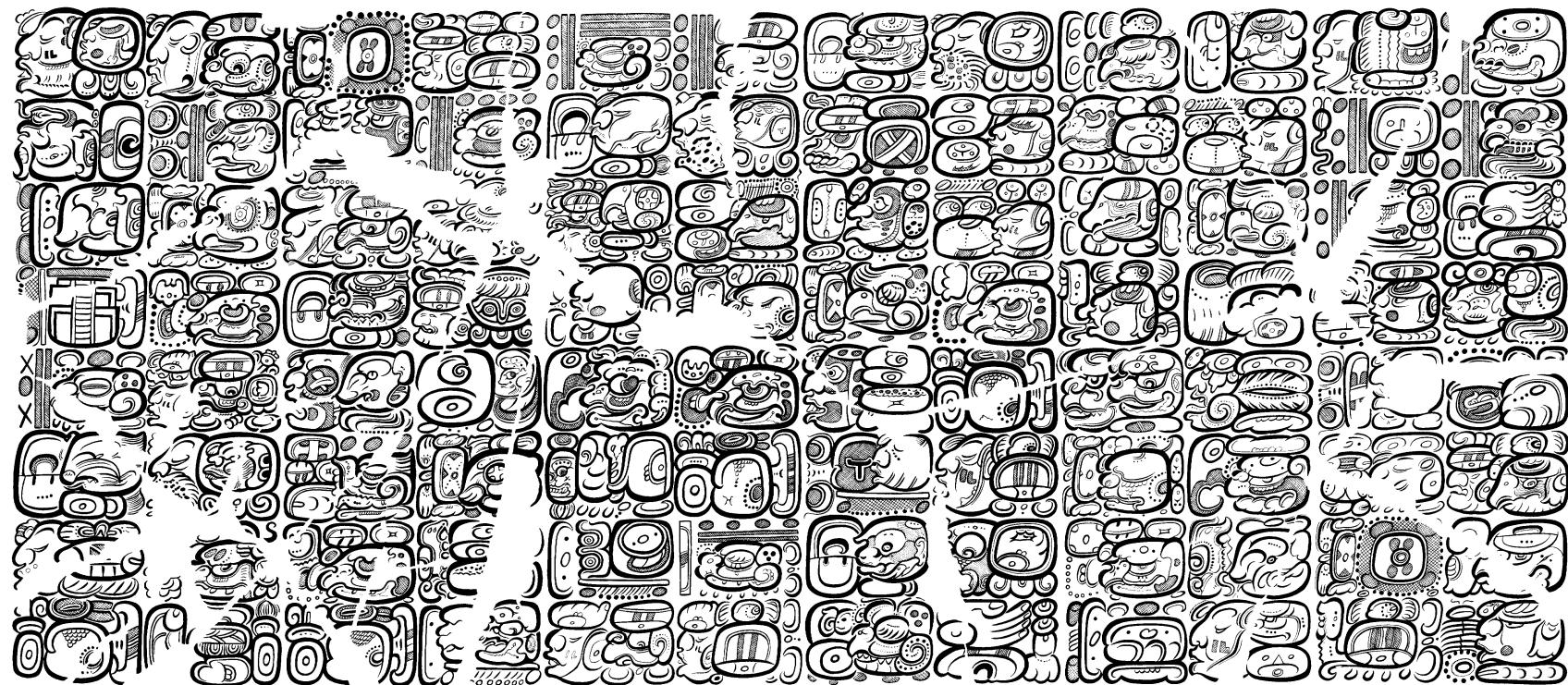


## A Selection of Early Classic Maya Texts (cont'd)

'Covarrubias' Jade (drawing by David Mora-Marin)

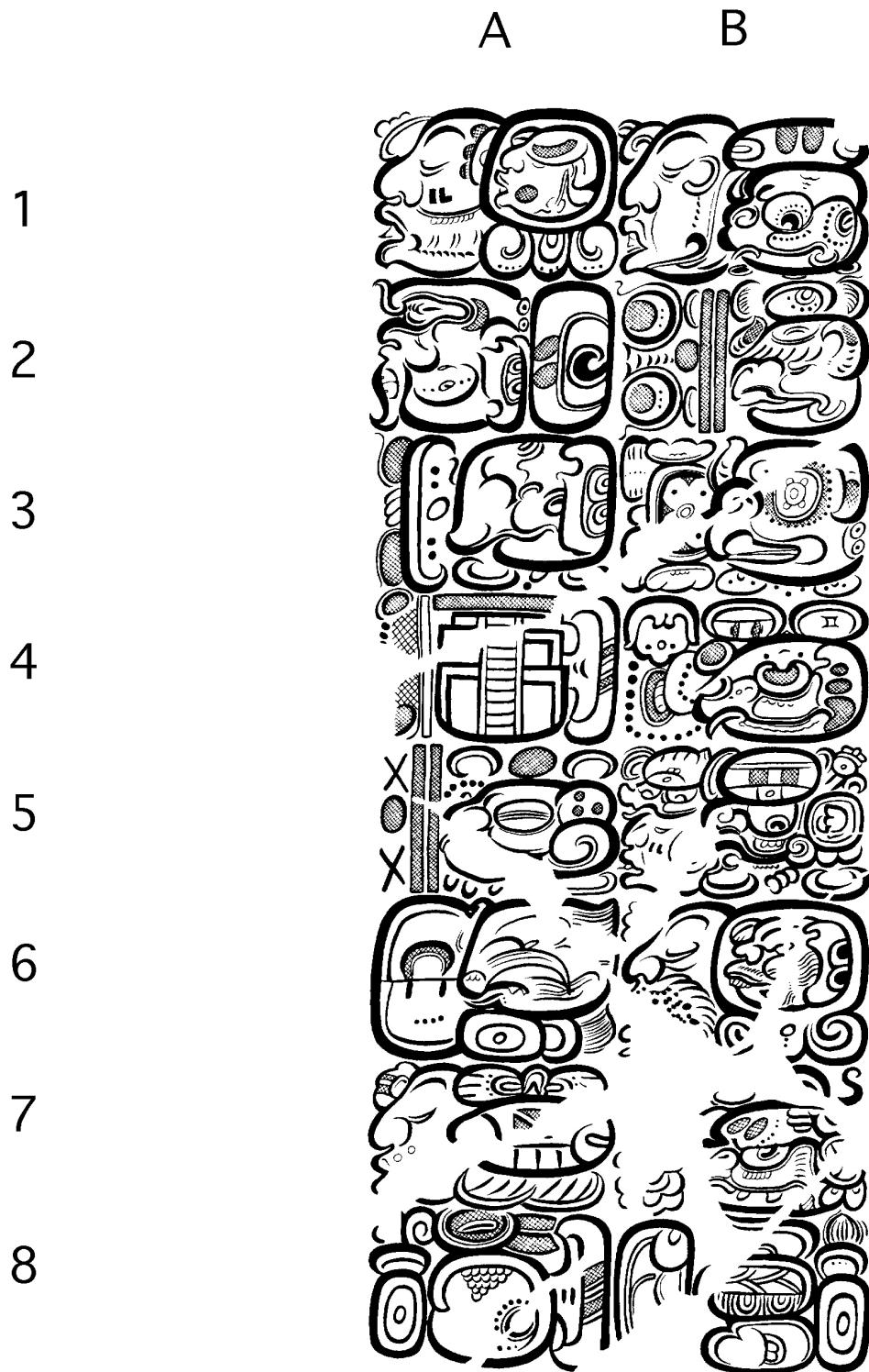


**A Selection of Late Classic Maya Texts** (Palenque, Tablet of the 96 Glyphs. Drawing by Simon Martin.)



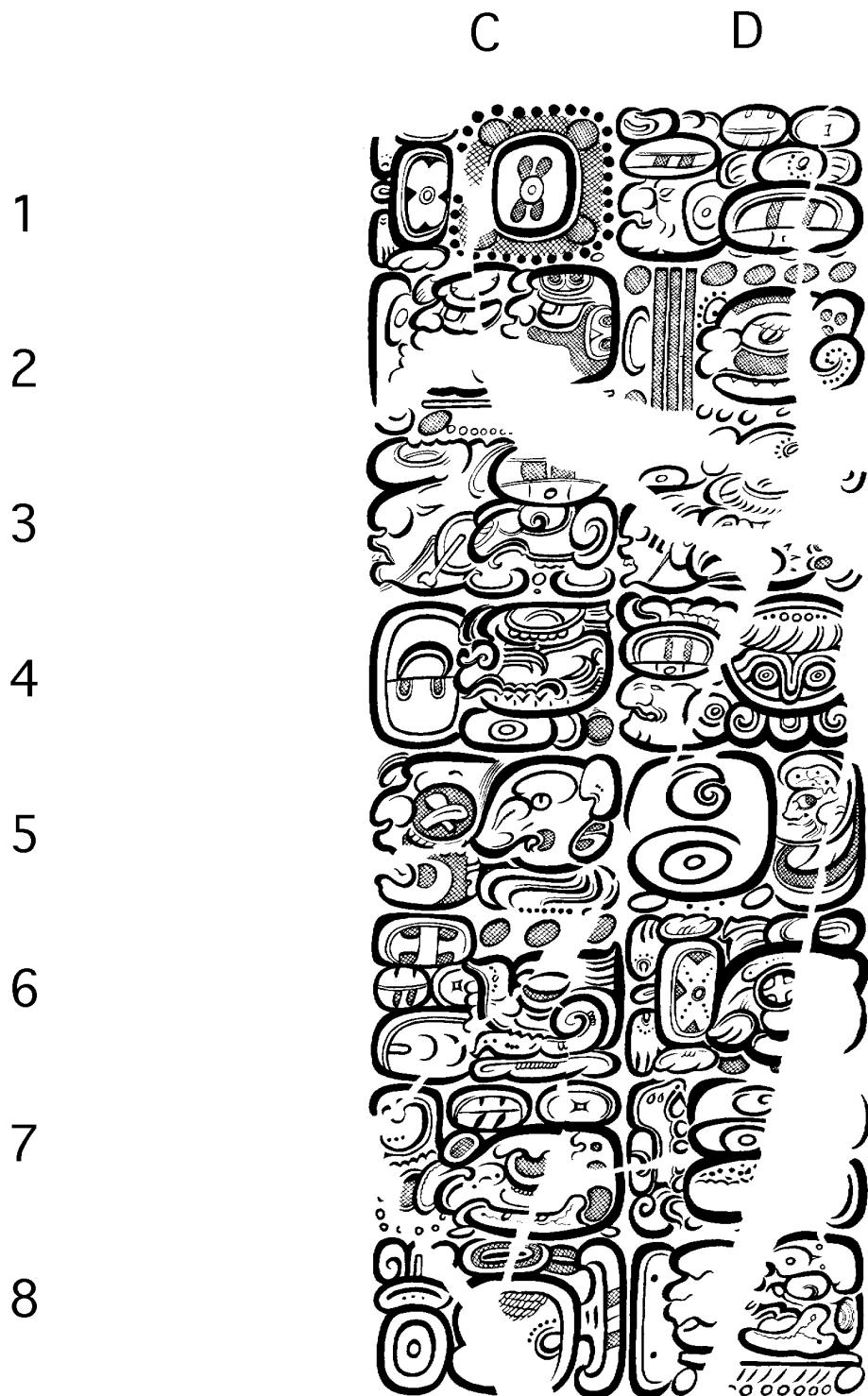
## A Selection of Late Classic Maya Texts (cont'd)

Palenque, Tablet of the 96 Glyphs (Drawings by Simon Martin.)



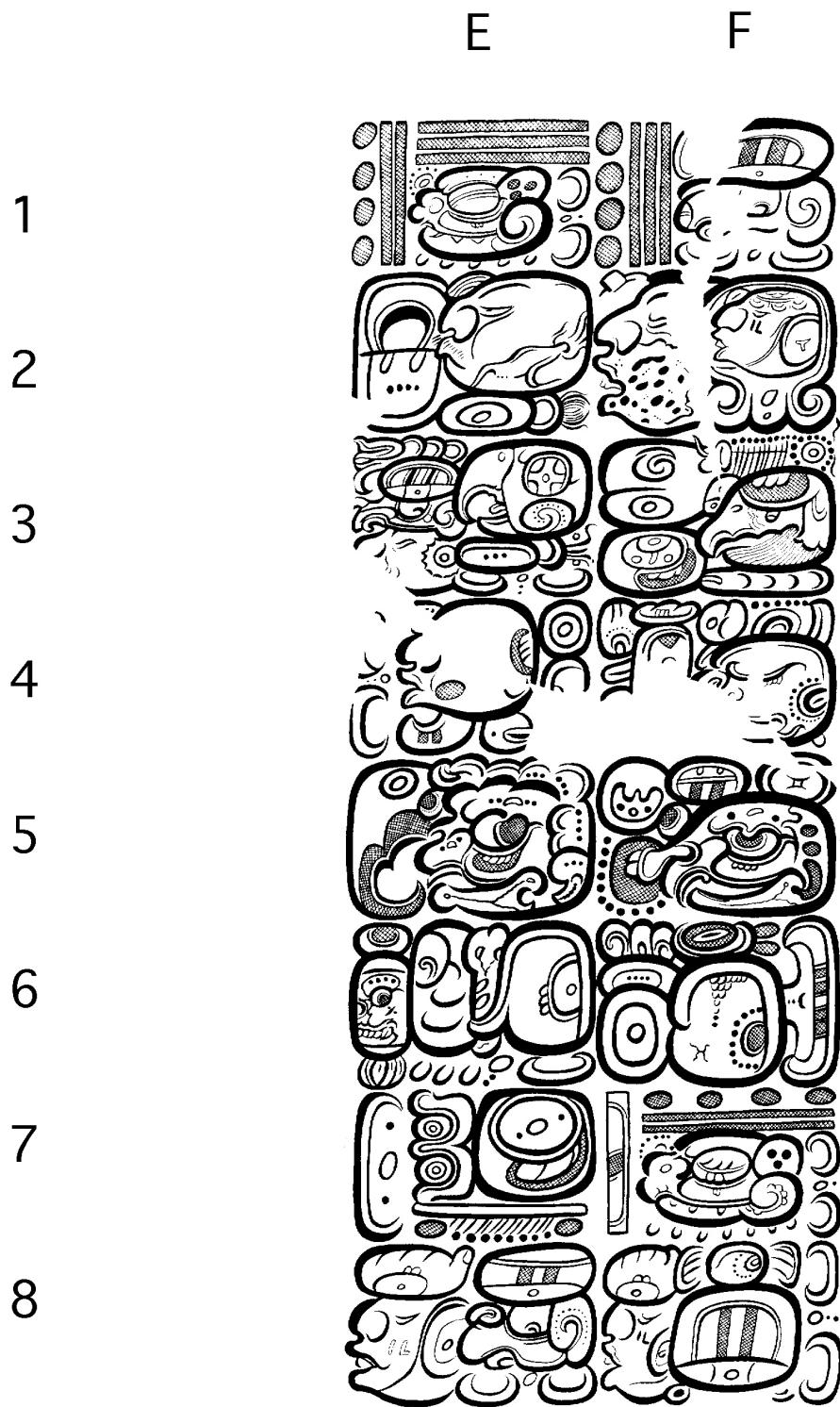
## A Selection of Late Classic Maya Texts (cont'd)

Palenque, Tablet of the 96 Glyphs (Drawings by Simon Martin.)



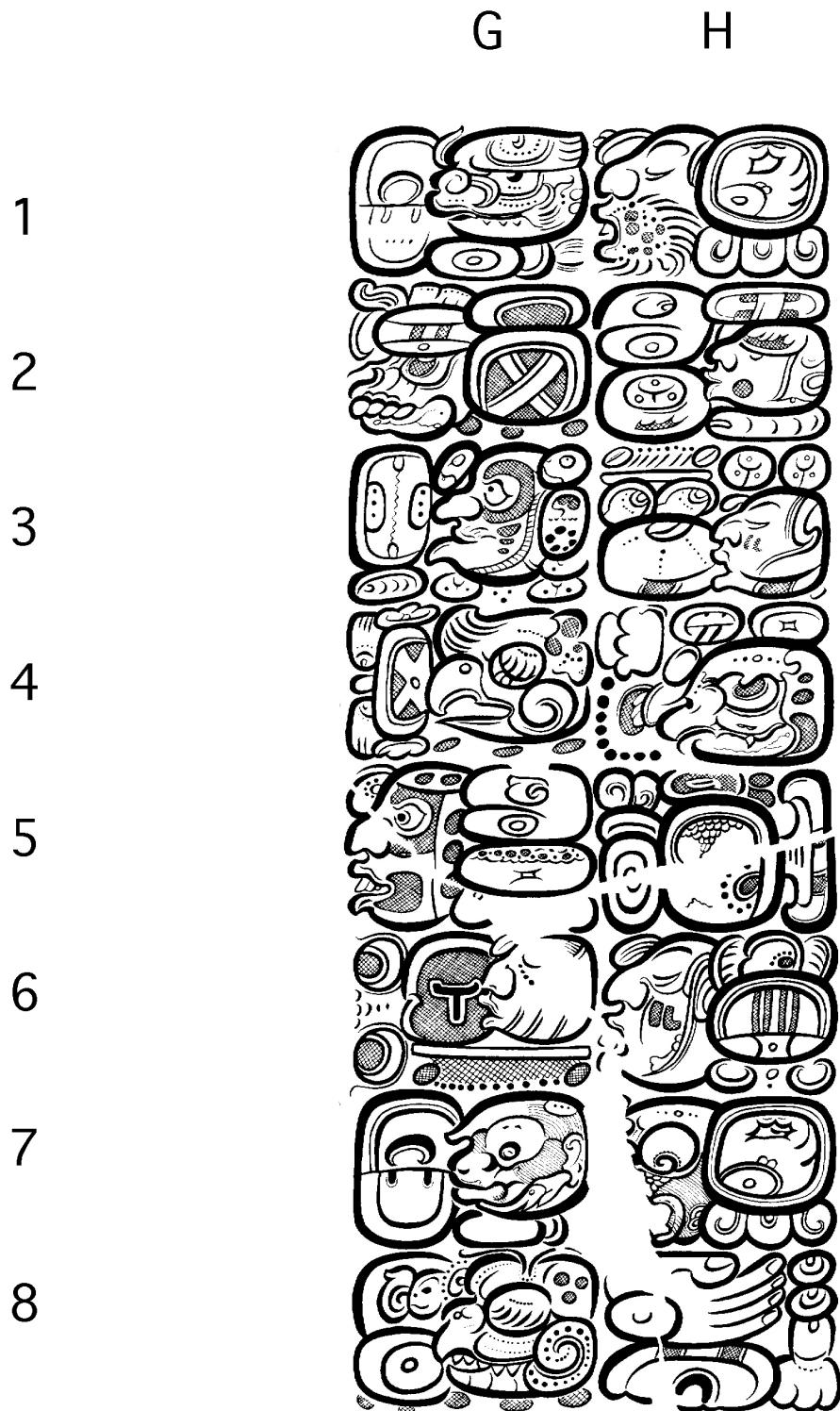
## A Selection of Late Classic Maya Texts (cont'd)

Palenque, Tablet of the 96 Glyphs (Drawings by Simon Martin.)



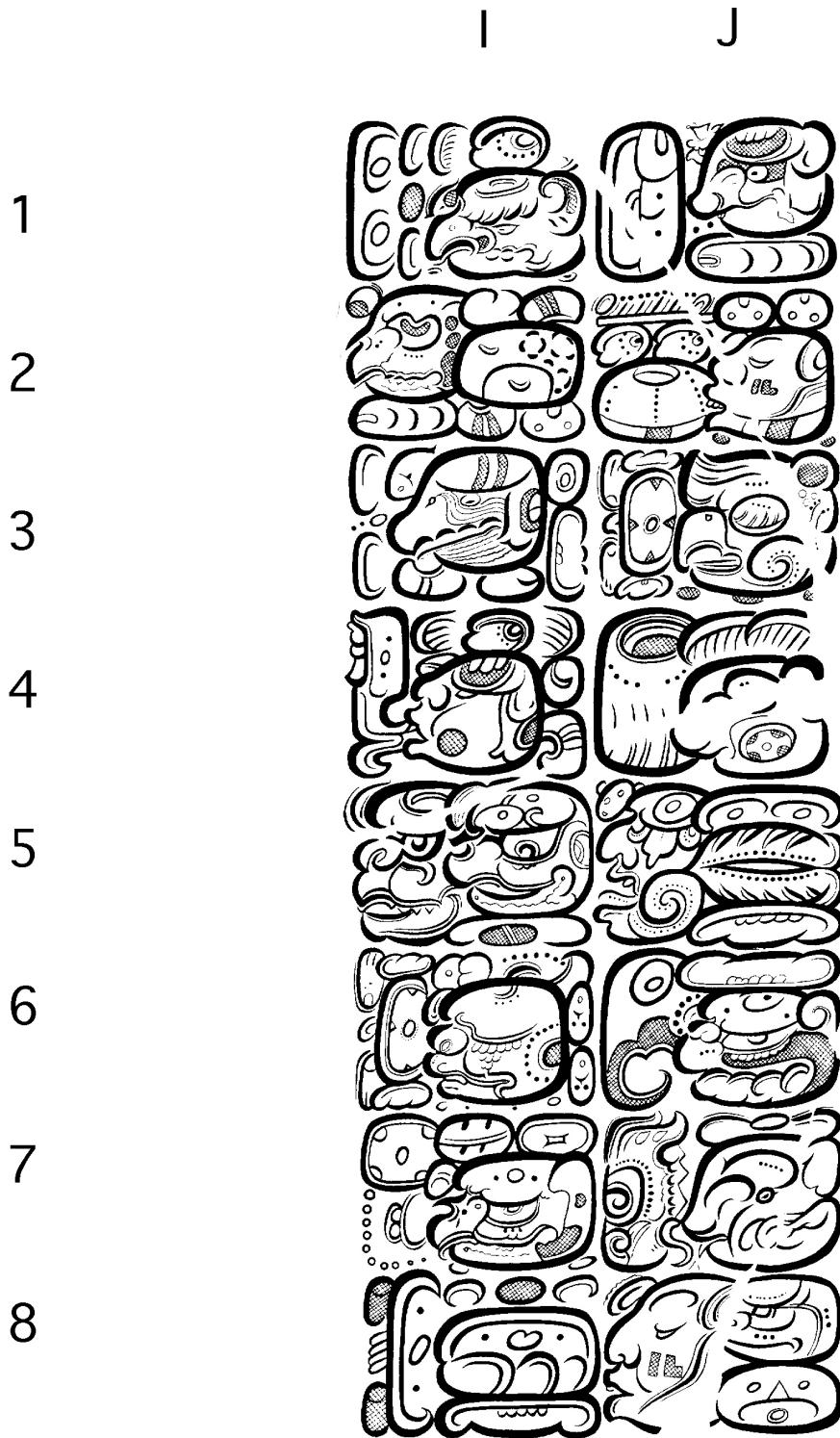
## A Selection of Late Classic Maya Texts (cont'd)

Palenque, Tablet of the 96 Glyphs (Drawings by Simon Martin.)



## A Selection of Late Classic Maya Texts (cont'd)

Palenque, Tablet of the 96 Glyphs (Drawings by Simon Martin.)



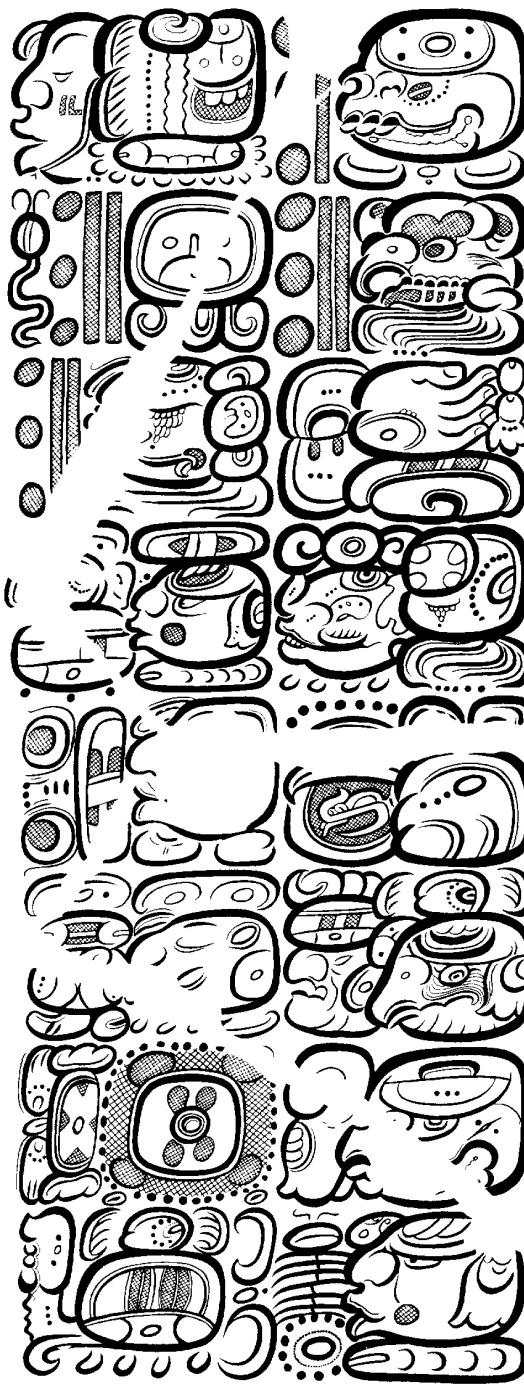
## A Selection of Late Classic Maya Texts (cont'd)

Palenque, Tablet of the 96 Glyphs (Drawings by Simon Martin.)

K

L

1



2

3

4

5

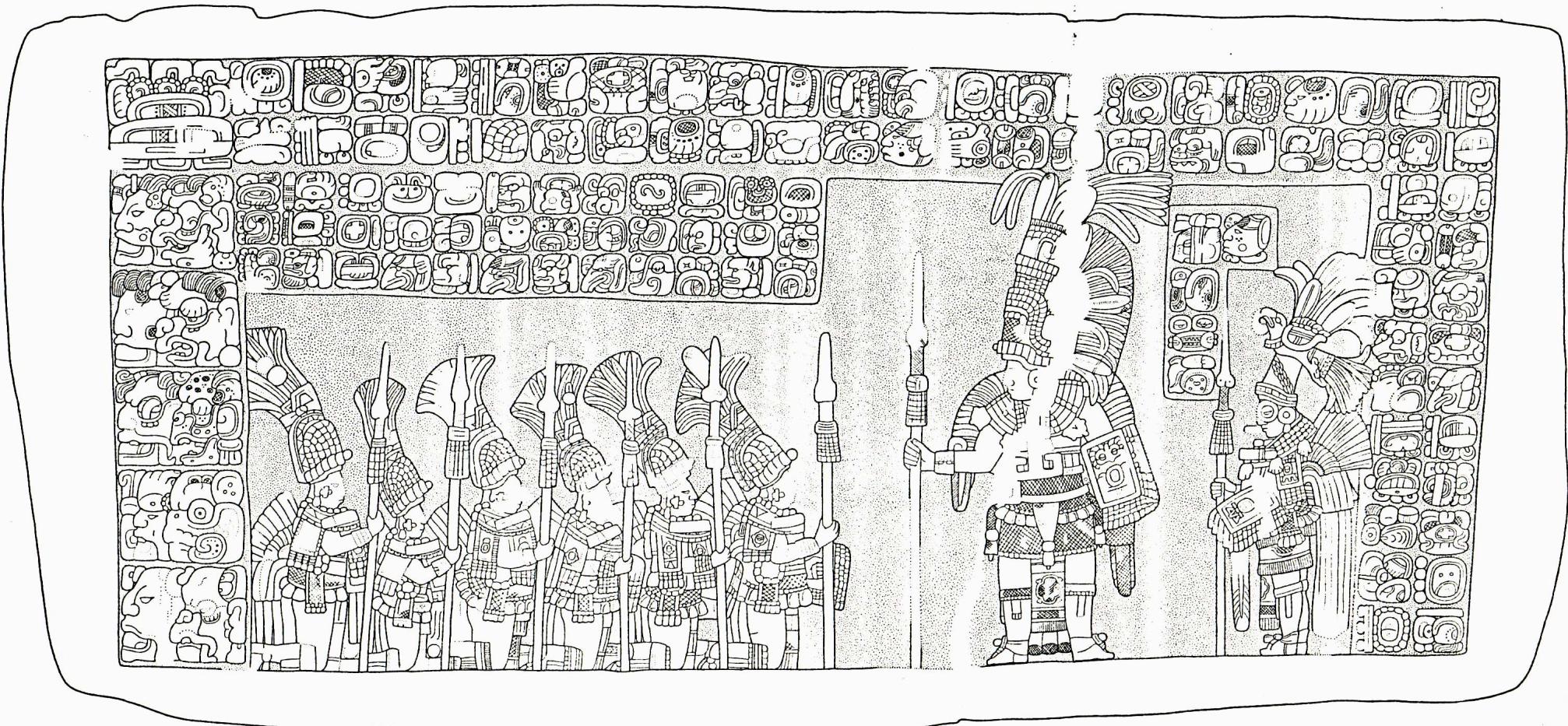
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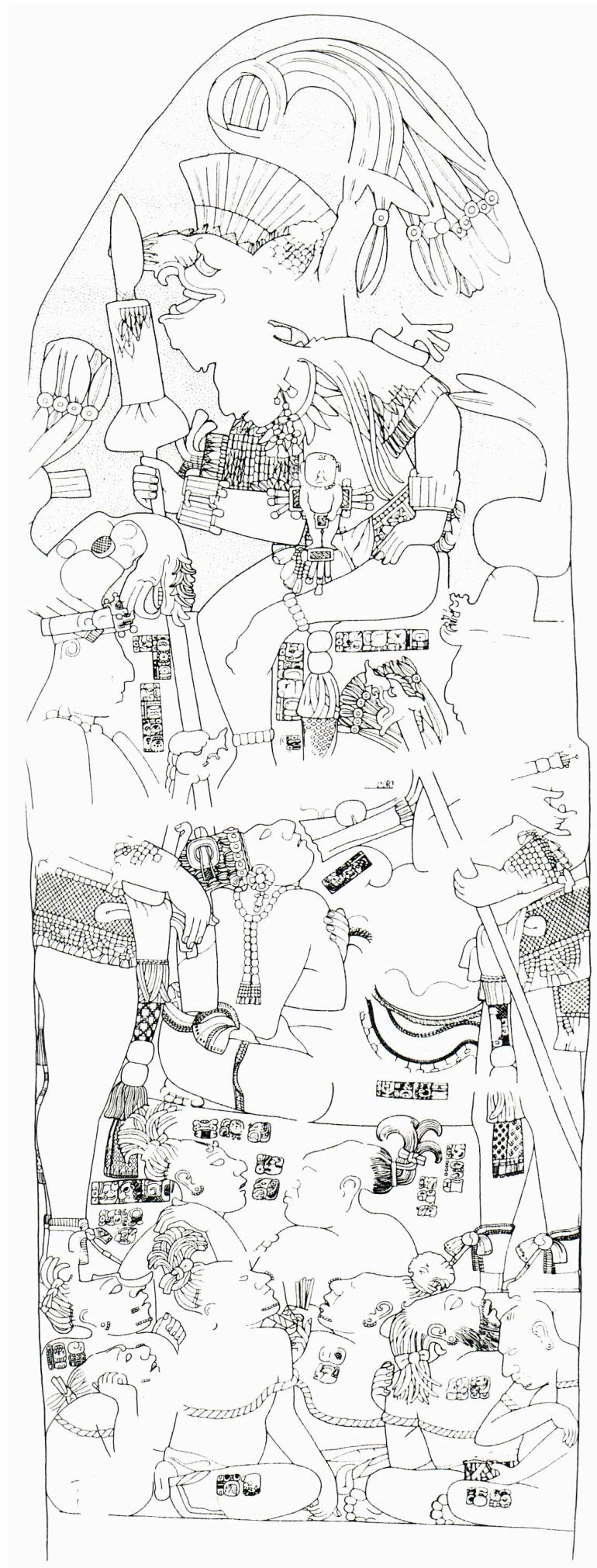
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**PIEDRAS NEGRAS: Panel 2.**

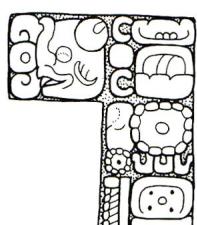
(Drawing by David Stuart)



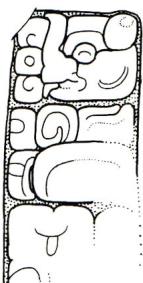


PIEDRAS NEGRAS: Stela 12, Front. Texts.

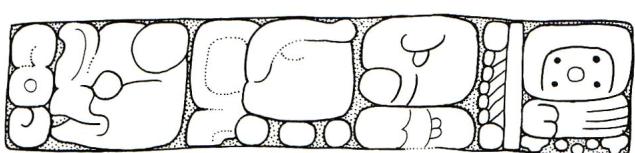
(CMHI 9: 63; drawings by David Stuart)



E1-4



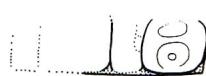
G1-4



I1-4



F1-4



J1-2



H1-2



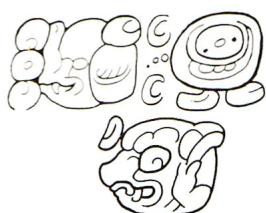
K1-3



L1-3



N1-3



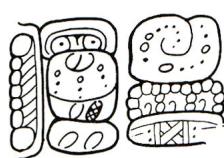
M1-3



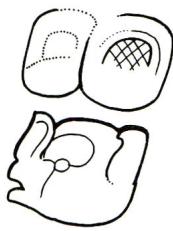
O1-2



P1-4



S1-2



V1-2



Q1-3



R1-3



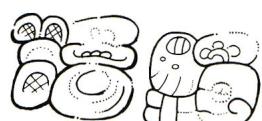
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U1-2



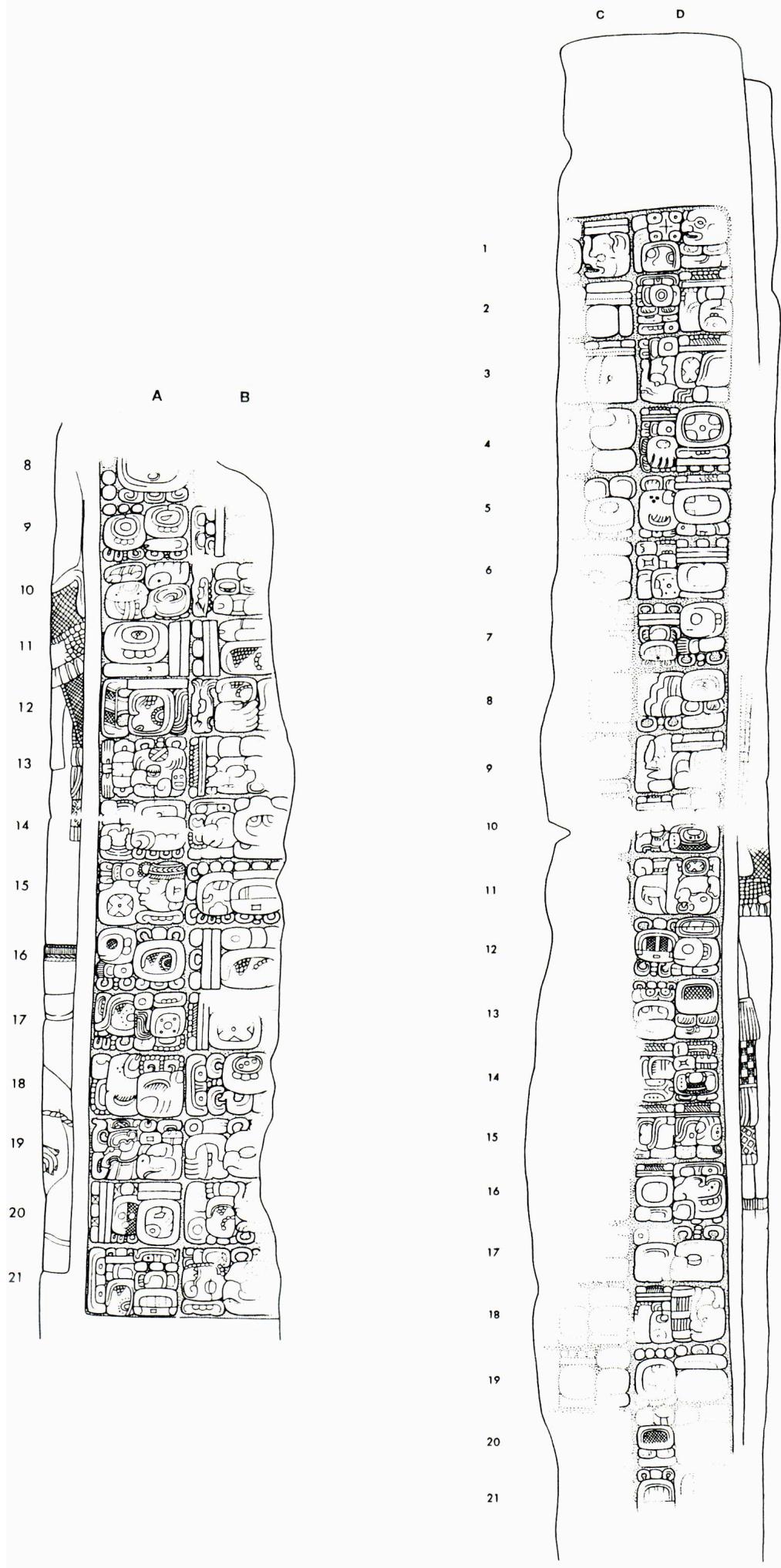
W1-2



X1-2

**PIEDRAS NEGRAS: Stela 12, Right and Left Sides.**

(CMHI 9: 62; drawings by David Stuart)



**YAXCHILAN: Lintel 10.**

(CMHI 3: 31; drawing by Ian Graham)

