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The Ñuiñe System of Writing in the Lower Mixteca, México

Translation of the Spanish by Alex Lomónaco

Research Year: 1995

Culture: Mixtec

Chronology: Classic Period

Location: Oaxaca, México

Site: Lower Mixteca

This refers to the Ñuiñe archaeological material, after the Mixtecan term "hot land", which is how the Lower Mixteca was known in the XVI century. Travelers and scholars have classified these monuments as Zapotecan, Mixtecan, Teotihuacan, or as part of a particular style of the Classic period in the Lower Mixteca. In the 60's, Paddock used the term Ñuiñe to refer to a series of remains of a same style (little bowls with dentated rims and spouted handles, urns with a square bottom, colossal little heads, and stone carvings).

Later archaeological salvages incorporated the slab-block type construction characteristic, and thin orange ceramics with a micaceous temper.

The approximate areas where the epigraphic and iconographic manifestations of the Ñuiñe are to be found include the districts of Huajuapán de León, Juxtlahuaca and Silacayoapan in Oaxaca; extending to Acatlán de Osorio in Puebla.

Study of the material:

Most of these stone monuments are no longer in their archaeological contexts, and are now a part of modern constructions in the towns of this region; this makes our work slower at the time of decoding the messages.

To work with these engravings it is indispensable to have graphic material at hand: drawings, as well as photographs taken with a graded lighting that allows the reliefs to stand out. A computer is also a big help to save the repertoire of images analyzed.

A first step for this study is the systematization of the material available for the creation of two catalogs, one containing the information on the relief, and the other to contemplate the classification of the glyphs used in each message.

Glyphic analysis:

Patterns and structures were detected in the messages, and groups of glyphs have been identified. So far, the information imprinted in the Ñuiñe-style reliefs is mainly of a calendaric nature, and like other Mesoamerican regions, they had knowledge of the ritual (260 days) and the solar (365) calendars.

As to the ritual calendar, it shows 29 glyphs associated with numerals of dots and bars below thirteen; 19 occupied the positions of the 20 days, and the remaining ones are variants.

Regarding the solar calendar, I have found three forms of the year glyph represented in profile, front, and with a looped shape, each associated to the days known as year bearers. The Ñuiñe system uses 3 groups of bearers distinctly associated with year variants, which validates our supposition that these reliefs are not contemporary.

In the non-calendaric glyphs, basically three recurrent structures were identified which correspond to specific sectors of the area, such as that of hands carrying objects, jaguars devouring individuals or on hills and dates on toponyms.

Perhaps because of their geographic location amidst the Central Valleys and the Central Plateau, the Ñuiñe reliefs contain glyphs similar to those of these regions although they form a particular system for the way they combine those signs and structure the messages.

Submitted 02/01/1995 by:
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