



# Glyph Dwellers

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## An Ending Sign in the Isthmian Script

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This report examines one of several structural patterns that occur in two early Isthmian texts. Structural analysis can assist the early steps of decipherment, often more reliably than looking for what word or sound a single sign might represent. Heinrich Berlin (1958), Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1960, 1968), Paul Schellhas (1904), and Alfred Tozzer and Glover Allen (1910) are among those who described structural patterns ultimately critical to the decipherment of the Maya script. This note examines the most frequently occurring sign on La Mojarra Stela 1 and the Tuxtla Statuette (Winfield Capitaine 1988), and the structures defined by it, without reference to what language the texts might represent. A horizontal line with down-turned edges and two marks (u-shapes, dots, or half-circles) under it (MS20) occurs 52 times in Isthmian texts. The purpose of this note is to show its pattern of occurrence and to offer evidence that MS20 functions as a boundary or punctuation mark and may have no syllabic or logographic reading (for a numbered sign list of the Isthmian script, see Macri 2017).

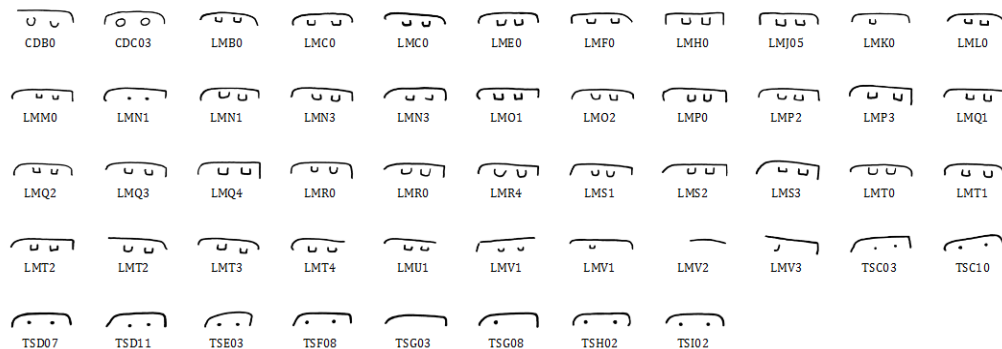
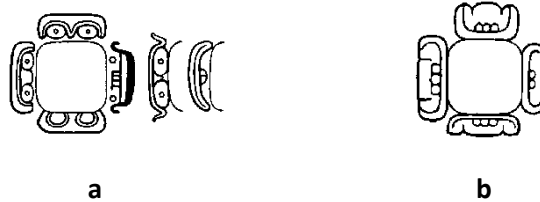


Fig. 1. MS20 with coordinates. Abbreviations: CD: Chiapa de Corzo sherd; LM: La Mojarra Stela 1; TS: Tuxtla Statuette.

The sign was noted by C. C. Willoughby as similar to the common affix found in the Maya script (Holmes 1907), labeled T1 by J. Eric S. Thompson (Thompson 1962), phonetic **u** (**Fig. 2a**). Michael Coe (1976:117-118) associated MS20 with T23, phonetic **na** (**Fig. 2b**). Based on its placement in the Tuxtla and La Mojarra Stela 1 texts, Maricela Ayala (1983), Thomas Barthel and Hasso von Winning (1989), Sylvia Méluzin (1987), and Fernando Winfield Capitaine (1988) observed that the Isthmian "bracket" is an "ending sign."



**Fig. 2.** Examples of the Maya signs designated T1 and T23 from Thompson (1962).

On the Tuxtla Statuette, of 9 or 10 columns, five end with MS20 (C, E, F, H, I). Eight of the 22 columns on La Mojarra Stela 1 end with it (B, C, F, K, L, T, U, V); plus an additional one occurs just before the long count date on the right side (LMM7), clearly another text "ending." In no instance does it occur first in a column. The Chiapa de Corzo sherd contains two examples, but the fragmentary text shows no column endings.

Justeson and Kaufman (1993) do not see MS20 as a punctuation mark, but as a grammatical suffix in the Epi-Olmec language that they assert is related to proto-Zoquean. They assign the value **wu** to MS20, explaining that it functions both as an independent completive suffix on verbs, and a relativizing enclitic on nouns and adjectives (Justeson and Kaufman 2001; Mora-Marín 2010). The purpose of this analysis is not to challenge their identification of the language of the texts, but simply to point out patterns created by MS20.

Structural analysis supports the idea that MS20 indicates some sort of ending of a sequence of signs. What is less certain is whether or not it has a reading—a syllabic or logographic value. At this point, it seems an open question. MS20 is completely absent from the Feldspar Mask, a text of over 90 signs. This absence be more easily explained if it were simply a clause- or phrase-ending sign, that is, if it were a textual boundary marker, and not read. Likewise, the text on the Ceramic Mask, although shorter and barely legible, does not appear to have any examples of MS20. The loss of a punctuation mark does not impact a script in the same way as the loss of a syllabic or morphological sign. It seems that the ending sign may have fallen out of use, or simply was never used in some traditions of the Isthmian script.

In addition to occurring at many column endings, MS20 also occurs about three-quarters of the time within columns. An example of a rather long repeated sequence in the La Mojarra text suggests that although MS20 is used to end columns, it is absent within the same sequence when there is no column ending (**Fig. 3**; LMB7–C4 and LMR4–R8). Its absence from the second sequence occurs presumably without a change in meaning, suggesting that here it marks a graphic boundary, again challenging the notion that MS20 has a syllabic or logographic value.



Fig. 3. Repeated sequences LMB7–C4 and LMR4-R8 (After G. Stuart).

**Table 1** (two pages) and **Table 2** (one page) show the La Mojarra and Tuxtla texts divided into sections by MS20 (adapted and rearranged from drawings by George Stuart (Winfield Capitaine 1988), column V from a drawing by John Justeson (Justeson and Kaufman 1997). Upon seeing the text in this format, several repeated patterns immediately become apparent. In fact, this arrangement of signs invites identification of repeated sequences of two or three or more signs, of which there are many. The most obvious of these patterns is the repeated use of two signs (MS38/39 and MS34) in the first position.

MS38, the second most frequently occurring sign after MS20 begins lines eleven times; that is, it follows MS20 eleven times (H4, N11, N20, P27, R41, S13, S25, T7, T33, V1, and V11. MS39 does not appear in the La Mojarra text, but noting that MS39 stands in complementary distribution to MS38, Macri and Stark (1993) suggest that they are equivalent. MS39 occurs in first position on the Tuxtla Statuette four times (B1, C4, D1, F9), additional evidence for their equivalence. MS39 occurs on the Feldspar Mask (11 times), while MS38 is absent.

Another sign, MS24, occurs on the La Mojarra Stela four times in first position (N33, P40, Q34, Q48). MS22 occurs as the second sign in four lines (lines R41, S13, S25, S35). The line beginning at S35 is exceptionally long, and MS24 occurs approximately in the middle of the line. Here it is part of a sequence of two signs (MS34 followed by MS44) that also begins line Q34, so perhaps this is evidence of another "beginning."

These observations certainly do not exhaust the number of repeated sequences of signs found in Isthmian texts. They do point out the usefulness of looking at the texts using occurrences of MS20 as an organizing principle.



Table 1. The text of La Mojarra Stela 1 arranged in lines ending with MS20. The coordinate is given for the first sign of each line.

A1	
B1	
C1	
C5	
D1	
E4	
G1	
H4	
J6	
L1	
M1	
M8	Sign missing
N1	
N11	
N20	Approximately 10 signs missing
N30	Approximately 10 signs missing
N33	
N38	
O15	Approximately 8 signs missing
O27	Approximately 8 signs missing
O29	





P10

P27 Approximately 6 signs missing

P40

Q12

Q26

Q34

Q48

R4

R9

R41

S13

S25

S35

T7

T13

T24

T29

T33

U1



Table 2. Text of La Mojarra Column V and the Tuxtla Statuette arranged in lines.

V1												
V11												
V19												
V24												
A1												
B1												
C4												
D1												
D8												
D12												
F1												
F9												
G4												
G9												
I1												



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