

## A comic guide to the writing and reading of manual gestures in Ancient Maya iconography using indigenous sign languages

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Epigraphers and historians have long used ancient iconography to guide or verify translations of oral languages in accompanying texts, or to decipher ancient information transmitted in the iconography itself, including both stories transmitted mnemonically and data in written through phonetic and ideographic hieroglyphs representing oral languages. Yet recent research suggests that ancient Mesoamerican iconography may also have transmitted another mode of linguistic that has not been the focus of much research into ancient or even modern literacy: signed languages “spoken” mostly through gestures and manual signs people *articulate spatially* and *see*, rather than the oral-auditory languages that most people *articulate orally* and *hear*.

Comparative analysis of modern visuo-spatial languages spoken by Indigenous Mesoamericans today and reconstructing potential proto-signs can assist in the decipherment of gestures in ancient Maya art. This presentation argues that as occurs with all writing systems, reduction and simplification of what aspects of language got recorded was crucial to Mayas’ iconographic transcription of ancient gestural/signed language. In particular, ancient Maya artisan-scribes developed conventions for representing only certain parameters of signed languages. They also preferred to record short polysemic expressions and discourses in signs. Yet they simultaneously developed conventions for depicting movement that enabled widespread gestural literacy: the writing and reading of gestural signs in iconography. This presentation reviews some of these conventions, showing how they were reminiscent of those employed in modern comic strips, and they are crucial for the modern decipherment of gestural language in pre-Hispanic Maya iconography.

This presentation concludes with a summary of approaches that could help speakers of modern sign languages to translate gestures “written” graphically by ancient peoples elsewhere around the world.