# Background to the CMGG

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The website you're looking at – https://www.mayaglyphs.org – is a result of three independent threads coming together:

- The consolidation of my compilation of glyph variants – something which I had been doing since I started learning Classic Maya in November of 2019.
- The going live of the MHD (Maya Hieroglyphic Database) in early 2022 (https://www.mayadatabase.org).
- The release of the Bonn Maya Dictionary project standardized glyphs in late 2022 (https://classicmayan.org/zeichenkatalog).

As I assume that most readers will be familiar with the second and third of these threads, this document will concentrate on the first – the *Classic Maya Glyph Guide* (CMGG).

1. The initial trigger

When I started learning Maya, I found a number of excellent resources, both printed and in electronic form. These were introductory textbooks, workshop manuals, dictionaries, word lists, etc. Each resource had its strong points, but those strong points differed from resource to resource.

For example the strong point of Erik Boot's *The Updated Preliminary Classic Maya - English, English - Classic Maya Vocabulary of Hieroglyphic Readings* is the fact that there are references to the actual monuments and vases where each listed word can be found, but it has very little information on what the glyphs writing those words actually look like (the reader has to find a drawing or photograph of the inscription to find out). Conversely, other resources were very strong on showing what the glyphs look like, but don't indicate which inscriptions they are taken from. Some resources show just one "typical" example – very good in not overwhelming the beginning student, but not helpful when that student is confronted with the reality of the variation in the entire corpus. A resource like Tokovinine's *Beginner's Visual Catalog of Maya Hieroglyphs* is wonderful in that it distils the essential features of each glyph into a single "abstract", "idealized" example (something which couldn't be achieved when only one real-world example is provided), but in the real world, many examples would not have some of those features.

Thus, each resource had its strong points, but no resource had *all* the strong points of each resource. Not only that, but the glyph inventory varied from resource to resource. That is to say (in general) each work would provide a syllabogram list and a logogram list, but exactly which glyphs would be given in the various syllabogram or logogram lists would differ (to say nothing of which glyph *variants* would be given per resource). For example, every resource lists the syllabogram **u**, but each gives slightly different variants of **u**; every resource lists the logograms **BAHLAM** and **WITZ**, but each gives slightly different variants of them (or just one example and no variants at all). For less commonly occurring glyphs, some resources include them while others don't.

This caused a bit of difficulty for anything outside of the most basic glyphs and the most basic variants of the most basic glyphs. If I vaguely recalled seeing a more "obscure" glyph (or a more "obscure" variant of a *common* glyph) in one of the resources but couldn't quite remember what it looked like or how it was read, then I'd have to look through several different documents before I found what I was thinking of. Sometimes I never succeeded in finding the example that I had in mind.

Furthermore, the different resources use slightly different spelling conventions – some indicate vowel length and aspirated internal vowels, and glottalization, and others don't (as a matter of principle); some write plain *b* while others write *b'*; some write initial glottal stops, others don't; some write the glottal stop as an apostrophe, other write it with the official symbol (somewhat resembling a question mark without the dot); etc.

2. A "centralized document"

I felt a need for a single, "centralized" document which I could go to, where every syllabogram or logogram in every appendix of every major teaching resource was listed – all in one standardized orthography and format. Ideally, under every lemma/listing of a particular syllabogram or logogram, I would find – at one glance – all the variants which that teaching resource had deemed worthy of including in their specific resource.

As I started compiling such a "centralized document", I found it handy to record written notes on each particular syllabogram or logogram. I would write a short section on the number of variants I knew of (describing briefly the distinguishing characteristics of each variant). I also started adding a note to remind myself not to confuse one glyph with another which looked quite similar. Or a note to remind myself not to confuse two Maya words which sounded similar, even if their glyphs looked totally different and they meant totally different things. This grew into explicitly recording which characteristics made the two similar glyphs (or similar-sounding words) different. As time passed, more and more things got added to these notes: the history of various proposed pronunciations of a logogram; conflicting proposals and the pros and cons of each proposal; notes on papers where important additional information could be found concerning a particular glyph. Each entry hence grew quite organically, to become a sort of "brain dump" of everything I knew (or should know or had come across) concerning a glyph.

In that gradual learning process, I had also gathered more than 2,000 academic papers, and more than 70 PhD theses. These were initially from the FAMSI and Mesoweb websites, later, from www.academia.edu. This too was a valuable resource, but I've (obviously) had the time to read only a *tiny* fraction of these papers. Nevertheless, information gleaned from these papers and Master's and PhD theses also ended up in my "centralized document". Specifically, what got added were not only references to the specific articles from which I'd got important information for any particular glyph but also examples of glyphs which were shown in these papers. I also began writing short notes summarizing the important conclusions of that article, when they pertained to a specific glyph.

At the same time, as I studied more and more inscriptions, I came across more and more interesting variants of glyphs – variants which were not shown in the teaching resources or which I hadn't seen in the academic works I'd read. My original intention had been to centralize just the examples from the teaching resources, but as I was adding glyph examples from academic works, I also started adding examples directly from the (drawings of) inscriptions themselves. This process was of course very random – dependent on which inscriptions I had come across and decided to study, and the academic papers which I had happened to read along the way, in an attempt to throw light on these inscriptions.

Also, while it started out as being a list of syllabograms and logograms, this also got extended to include fixed phrases and the names/titles of the nobility and of deities, and even included components of glyphs, like the "orthographic doubler" and "property markers".

That then is the story of the genesis of the "central document" which I developed for myself. As I mentioned above, it grew to become my central repository of everything I wanted to record about anything related to Maya epigraphy.


3. Sharing with others

Despite its modest origins, I was persuaded by friends that the information compiled in the document might be of considerable interest and use to other students of Maya epigraphy. I was also persuaded that it was already in a good enough state to start sharing with others, rather than waiting until it had been further improved. That's the reason that it got given the more formal name of *Classic Maya Glyph Guide* (CMGG). And in the 21st century, one very obvious way to share information is via a website. That website was, in turn, given the name *Learner's Maya Glyph Guide and Concordance* (LMGGC), because it weaves together the information compiled in the CMGG with information from three other major sources:

- Eric Thompson's compilation of glyphs, with the examples he provided (mostly without readings or meanings).
- MHD's classification of glyphs, with its examples, readings, and meanings.
- The Bonn Dictionary Project's refinement and extension of Thompson, with its examples and readings (currently without meanings).

The LMGGC homepage has as its main emphasis the content of the CMGG with some correlation to the three pre-existing resources while the main emphasis of the LMGGC Concordance is a detailed correlation of all four (i.e. including the CMGG) with a complete listing of the glyphs in them – in particular, including those not covered by the CMGG.

As explained earlier, the CMGG is still very much a "work in progress". It's constantly being improved and extended. These improvements will find their way into the LMGGC via regular releases.


4. Caution

I'm only too well aware that the work in MHD and Bonn has been done by professionals and academics, many with decades of experience in Maya epigraphy (some of the authors and researchers dating back to the time of Linda Schele and Peter Mathews). In contrast, I am a layperson and I've been involved with Maya glyphs for a far shorter period of time. Furthermore, I don't speak a modern Mayan language, and I don't speak even basic Spanish.

I can absolutely guarantee that there are incorrect statements and ideas (and a frustrating residue of typos, despite constant revision and proofreading) in the CMGG. The information it contains is offered – *in a spirit of utmost humility* – to beginners and intermediate students of Maya epigraphy.

I feel that the information it holds, "all in one spot", would have been of help to me, when I myself first started being a student of Maya glyphs. I hope it will be that, for users of this website. I'm happy to answer any questions about the material, including any detected inaccuracies and typos (see elsewhere on this website for how to give feedback).