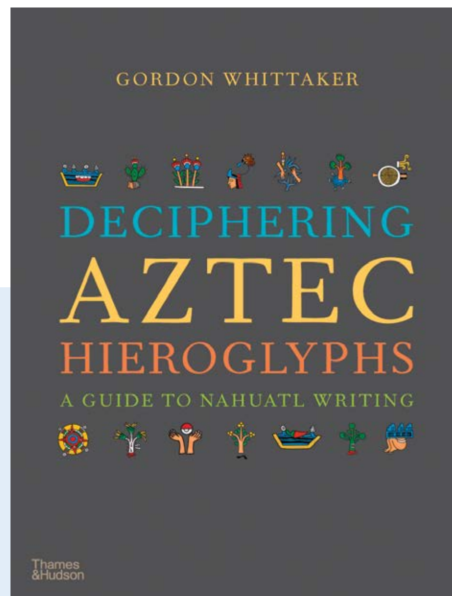


DECIPHERING AZTEC HIEROGLYPHS: A GUIDE TO NAHUATL WRITING

Gordon Whittaker

THAMES & HUDSON, £25, HARDBACK

ISBN 978-0500518724

A leading handbook of scripts and writing that runs to almost a thousand pages, *The World's Writing Systems* (1996), edited by Peter Daniels and William Bright, contains scarcely any reference to the Aztec writing system of Mesoamerica. Wikipedia's entry on 'Aztec writing' is brief and refers to no book-length study. So there is undoubtedly a need for this first book on the subject, *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs*, which aims to appeal to both scholars and the general reader, copiously and colourfully illustrated with Aztec glyphs that are visually compelling but intellectually challenging. Its author, philologist Gordon Whittaker, has written extensively on Aztec writing, the Aztec language Nahuatl, and Aztec civilisation. Indeed, his book has been half a century in the making, with the long-time encouragement of his former doctoral advisor Michael D Coe, an eminent Maya scholar and historian of Mexico who died in 2019.

As Whittaker observes, 'While the Maya script has now begun to find a place in handbooks on writing systems, Aztec writing has to date not fared anywhere near as well. If it is mentioned at all, it is quickly dismissed as a mere forerunner of writing – something along the lines of Plains Indian "pictography". But... this is far from an accurate or adequate assessment of this long-overlooked Central Mexican phenomenon.' Indeed, he stresses controversially – disagreeing with fellow Aztec scholar Alfonso Lacadena – 'it is especially in the area of phoneticism that Aztec writing shines brilliantly.'

The Aztec script is, of course, far younger than the Maya script, which originated in the 3rd century BC. The Aztecs flourished from about 1300, became an empire in 1431, and were defeated by the Spanish invaders of Mexico in 1521. Their writing system therefore lasted for only a few centuries. It survived the Spanish conquest – the famous Aztec *Codex Mendoza* (now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford) was created around 1541 with an explanation in Spanish – but disappeared from use in the fourth quarter of the 16th century as the last Aztec scribes passed away. Although its precise origins are lost in time, according to Whittaker, the Aztecs themselves traced their roots as far back as Teotihuacan, a city of global proportions in the early centuries of the 1st millennium AD. This was located not far from the marshy islands that in 1325 became the site of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, now the historic centre of Mexico City.

With remarkably few exceptions, in the Maya system, complex as it is, a sign is either a logogram (representing a word) or a syllabogram (representing a syllable). In this respect, Mayan resembles Mycenaean Linear B, the earliest script for writing Greek. If a Maya sign has a logographic value, it generally has no syllabic value, and vice versa. But in the Aztec system, by contrast, 'signs frequently have multiple logographic values, and these generate multiple phonetic values'. In this respect, the Aztec script resembles Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform, and is even more complex.

Many Aztec signs have both a phonetic and a logographic value, and sometimes more than this. For example, the Aztec drawing of a human leg (below left) has one phonetic value and the logographic values 'leg', 'thigh', 'heel', 'calf', 'foot', 'stand', 'arrive', 'stamp', and 'run'. The determination of the correct value for many Aztec glyphs is therefore dependent on context and often far from definitive.

After the Spanish conquest, Aztec scribes were influenced by the Spanish alphabet and somewhat increased the phoneticism in their script. But how to translate the Spanish surname 'Díaz', which has no transparent meaning in Spanish, into Nahuatl? 'The scribe, in a stroke of genius (or perhaps just acting on an innocent assumption), interpreted the name as if it were the Spanish numeral *diez*, "ten", equivalent to Nahuatl *màtlactli*, and applied the appropriate glyph to it – ten small circles in two sets of five', writes Whittaker in the final chapter of his pioneering book. No wonder scholars have long struggled with deciphering Aztec script!

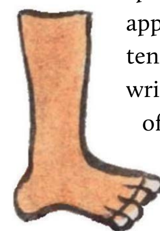
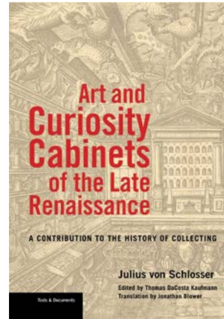


IMAGE: © 2021 Gordon Whittaker

Andrew Robinson

ART AND CURIOSITY CABINETS OF THE LATE RENAISSANCE: A CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY OF COLLECTING



Julius von Schlosser
Edited by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, translated by Jonathan Blower
GETTY PUBLICATIONS, £50
PAPERBACK
ISBN 978-1606066652

When, in 1908, Julius von Schlosser published *Art and Curiosity Cabinets of the Late Renaissance* (originally *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance*), he had been working for more than 15 years in what is now the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, where he became Director of the Collections of Arms and Applied Industrial Arts in 1901. Although at the time Schlosser was also lecturing at the Universität Wien, he regarded the curatorial work as his main occupation. Indeed, the museum experience deeply inspired his scholarship and most of his studies, including the present volume.

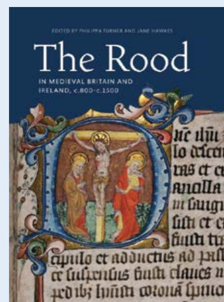
Contrary to what the title suggests, Schlosser's discussion of art and curiosity cabinets is not limited to the late Renaissance, but spans from ancient history to the 19th century. Following a strict chronological order and covering all Europe (with a particular focus on Austria and Germany, but also including extra-European artefacts), the author ranges from what he calls the prehistory of collecting to the origin of the modern museum.

The first section of the book focuses on ancient Greek temple treasures, described as the first public collections, and on medieval church treasures, full of wondrous and mysterious objects. Schlosser then dedicates the second, longest section to Renaissance art and curiosity cabinets. These collections were open to selected audiences, who appreciated the objects they contained for either their artistic or scientific qualities. Often considered as microcosms, the richness and variety of which reflected the complexity of the macrocosm, such eclectic collections became fashionable in northern European courts: the Kunstkammer organised by Archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol at Ambras at the end of the 16th century is the best example of its kind, according to Schlosser. A short section on more recent collectors and collections leads to the opening of the modern public museum in England.

Art and Curiosity Cabinets of the Late Renaissance is a seminal book that helped lay the foundations of the modern history of collecting, museology, and material culture studies. It is also, somewhat surprisingly, the first of Schlosser's works ever to be translated into English. In his penetrating introduction, a precious addition to the careful translation by Jonathan Blower, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann investigates the reasons behind this late revaluation of Schlosser's innovative scholarship. Through an informative discussion of the author's biography and intellectual background, as well as of the cultural and historical Viennese context, DaCosta Kaufmann shows why this relatively short book was not only a pioneering contribution to the history of art at the time of its publication, but also why it should itself be regarded today as an interesting product of European culture at the turn of the 20th century.

Barbara Furlotti

THE ROOD IN MEDIEVAL BRITAIN AND IRELAND, *c*.800–*c*.1500



Edited by Philippa Turner and Jane Hawkes
BOYDELL & BREWER, £60
HARDBACK
ISBN 978-1783275526

The cross is ubiquitous in medieval Christian iconography. As it was on the cross that Jesus died, bringing believers salvation, it is a critical component of the religion. But, despite the ubiquity and apparent simplicity of the instantly recognisable form, it has lent itself to substantial variation throughout history. The period covered by this new book – from the 9th to the 16th century – is no exception. In the early medieval period, for instance, Christ is depicted as a triumphant figure on the cross; later, a more empathic humanised figure, suffering the horrors of crucifixion, becomes more prevalent.

In English scholarship, the term 'rood' is used to refer to a monumental crucifix in a church, positioned at the boundary between the nave and the choir or chancel, but in the medieval period the same word, and also the Latin *crux* (cross), describes all manner of crosses in all manner of contexts. Following this broad interpretation of the rood, this volume, edited by art historians Philippa Turner and Jane Hawkes, brings together chapters by different researchers on the plethora of crosses in medieval Britain and Ireland: monumental Anglo-Saxon stone crosses that stand in the open air, crosses that appear in writing, metalwork, wood, paint, and more.

The link between crosses and identity is a fruitful topic for discussion, touched on by a number of chapters in *The Rood in Medieval Britain and Ireland*. For example, the Franciscan friaries of Ireland made use of cross imagery and also plant imagery pertaining to the Tree of Life, which linked them to their brothers elsewhere in Europe. Most of the book is, as its title suggests, devoted to Britain and Ireland, but one chapter takes us further afield to consider the *cruceiros*, the stone crosses of Galicia in northern Spain. As seen in the scholarship of Alfonso Daniel Rodríguez Castelao, who studied the stone crosses of Brittany and Galicia in the early 20th century, these *cruceiros* were linked to those in Ireland and co-opted into discourses of Galician nationalism, as signifiers of a distinct cultural identity, different from the rest of Spain.

Elsewhere, we encounter crosses beyond visual representations, in the realm of medicine. One chapter gives an informative account of the use of the cross in medical remedies, highlighting the pervasiveness of the cross in different aspects of medieval life. Some remedies instruct those seeking relief from various diseases to prepare a drink made using lichen removed from a – presumably stone – cross. Pieces of wood cut from a cross could similarly be added to water, then sprinkled on or drunk by the patient. And to deal with lung disease in cattle and barren fields, making a cross out of plant material forms part of the course of treatment.

With detailed studies and a broad range of perspectives, the book invites new ways of looking at this motif found all over medieval Europe.

Lucia Marchini