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**Review of Whittaker G. 2021. *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs: A Guide to Nahuatl Writing***

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## BOOK REVIEW

### Review of Whittaker G. 2021. *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs: A Guide to Nahuatl Writing*

Rosamund E. Fitzmaurice

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Whittaker G. 2021. *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs: A Guide to Nahuatl Writing*. London; Thames & Hudson. 224 pages (Hardbound). £25. ISBN 978-0-50051-872-4

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Since as early as the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century (Aubin 1849, 1885; Nuttall, 1888) Nahuatl and its hieroglyphs, have formed the backbone to research into Aztec ethnohistory and provide valuable context for Aztec archaeology. Yet Gordon Whittaker is the first to have published an English language volume aiming to introduce the subject to a wide audience with *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs: A Guide to Nahuatl Writing*. Drawing on his expertise and engaging with current debate in scholarship, Whittaker not only teaches the basics of deciphering Nahuatl glyphs but helps to contextualise them for those new to the subject.

Whittaker opens with an explanation of the impetus and inspiration for his work, noting the scholarship around ancient and modern glyphic writing including Maya, Egyptian, and Japanese, hinting at the comparative element of *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs* that is present throughout. He closes the introduction with reference pages for terms, concepts, and pronunciation, which should be bookmarked by all readers who may want to flick back through the book.

Whittaker's first chapter helps to situate central Mexican and Aztec culture within Mesoamerica in "World of the Aztec Scribe" and provides some background to the Aztec script. With real historic hieroglyphic examples from the *Codex Mendoza* and *Codex Florentino* readers are introduced to the key colonial source material which is regularly used throughout the text. Chapters 2 and 3 are the main teaching chapters in the book. In Chapter 2: "General Principles" Whittaker breaks down Nahuatl and

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its script explaining the underlying concepts of logograms and phonograms. With comparative examples and extracts from colonial documents we are expertly guided through the basics of the language. While Nahuatl script is largely preoccupied with names of people and places, i.e. proper nouns, those names are largely derived from full sentences or clauses. Thus, in Chapter 3: “An Essential Hieroglyphic Grammar”, Whittaker carefully explains the usual components of language: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs. It must be noted that these chapters are an introduction to decipherment with examples of how to do so. The book is excellent as a companion to an introductory course or lecture on the topic and provides exercises at the end of the chapters to give readers practice in their new skills. However, the book should not be treated as a complete textbook or glyph dictionary, since it does not contain enough activities to sustain a self-learner through to advanced interpretation of Aztec script. Keen students inspired by the book would benefit from attending extended workshops, a Classical Nahuatl (as opposed to a modern Nahuatl) language course, and seeking out further practice material. For those who hold a casual interest Whittaker provides an excellent overview; furthermore, those more experienced in reading glyphs may appreciate it as a reference book.

Readers who want to use the glyphs to give themselves an introduction to the world of the Aztecs will appreciate Chapter 5: “Names and Glyphs that ruled an Empire”. In this chapter, readers are taught to recognise the basic elements of the glyphs which are most prominently featured in precolonial and colonial texts. For example, the town glyphs which are shown on both the Stone of Motecuhzoma and the Stone of Tizocic (Tizoc) are closely compared and dissected. While it is hinted at throughout the book and considered somewhat in the chapter on the use of Aztec glyphs for Spanish names and terms (7), a dedicated space to discuss the process of Europeanised art style might be appreciated in this chapter. For those unfamiliar with the differences in styles, a comparison between colonial, European influenced codices with the precolonial Tlaxcala-Puebla codices (as Whittaker notes none survive from Mexico-Tenochtitlan) would have been a welcome addition.

Those more experienced in reading or interpreting Aztec glyphs will find particular interest in two chapters of the book dedicated to explaining scholarship around Aztec

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glyphs and the possible origins of the glyphs themselves. Chapter 4: “Phonetic writing: The Nahuatl Script in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Central Mexico” outlines scholarship and key debate around Nahuatl script. Whittaker contrasts his work and interpretations with that of Alfonso Lacadena (2008, 2018) and Marc Zender (2008), even providing a table illustrating where their interpretations differ. Whittaker’s main argument (which he has made before [Whittaker 2009, 2012]) is that Lacadena and Zender have been too heavily influenced by the rules of Mayan languages, and thus Maya hieroglyphs, to recognise the flexibility of Nahuatl script, in particular of the syllabary. Whittaker also suggests that study of the glyphs of Teotihuacan might point to the origin of Nahuatl writing and language in Chapter 6: “Origins of Nahuatl Writing: The Teotihuacan script”. For those craving more of a ‘code-breaking’ style of decipherment, such as those familiar with Maya glyphs, this chapter will be of particular interest. Of course, the glyphs of Teotihuacan (which declined dramatically after it burned toward the middle of the Classic Period ~500 CE) do not have a Spanish gloss as is the case for colonial codices, and scholars who work in this area use a combination of a glyphic and iconographic approach in their decipherment (see for example Nielsen and Helmke, 2020). It is with his knowledge of the Nahuatl language and its glyphs that Whittaker demonstrates his interpretations of the glyphs of Teotihuacan. Whittaker is hesitant to definitively state that an ancient version of Classical Nahuatl was the *lingua franca* of Teotihuacan and the states which it influenced; rather, he suggests that it could be one of the languages of the elite at the time.

Whittaker finishes the book with a delightful chapter outlining the creativity of the Nahuatl scribes in “Writing in Tongues: How Aztec Hieroglyphs came to record Spanish”. Readers familiar with Spanish will recognise the phonetic and logographic tricks demonstrated by scribes who choose whether to translate or transliterate Spanish names and titles as chosen by Whittaker. These tricks, readers will now recognise, are an inherent part of Nahuatl glyphic expression. Finally, Whittaker provides a brief commentary on his select bibliography to help readers navigate potentially unfamiliar secondary scholarship. Some of the works he refers to are introductions to other scripts and cultures, while others are in depth readings on Aztec codices.

*Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs* is an excellent introduction to a culture and language through a script which has thus far tended to remain only within the purview of ethnohistorians and archaeologists. While any future revisions might benefit from more comparison of colonial manuscripts with Pre-Columbian texts to help familiarise the readers with Indigenous art styles and codices, Whittaker covers all of the bases of Nahuatl glyphs for readers to explore. With this volume, Whittaker provides an extremely useful reference book for the experienced and inspiration for further study to those who have only just discovered Nahuatl Hieroglyphs.

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