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Winter Counts as Possible Precursors to Writing

Petra Eccarius

Native Americans of the Great Plains did not have a formal system of writing. These groups did, however. graphical various types of representation. One such example is the Siouan¹ winter counts, pictures recorded once each winter on buffalo hide (or later on cloth) which served mnemonic devices for a partial oral history and calendar of the group to which it belonged. Scholars often study the subject matter of these counts in order to gain historic or cultural information about Native groups². Despite the facts that only one important or unusual event is depicted each year, and that the accompanying verbal interpretations can be fraught with complications³, these records, along with the phrases memorized and passed down with them, have proven useful in this pursuit. However, the purpose of this paper is not to explore the historic significance of these counts, but rather to examine their pictures as symbols of those events. It is this researcher's contention that the pictures used in many of the Siouan winter counts share important characteristics with precursors of established systems, and therefore, could have been precursors to writing.

Before explaining my observations about winter count symbols, it is first important to define the vital elements of this paper's thesis. Florian Coulmas, in his book The Writing Systems of the World (1989), provides three fundamental characteristics of writing:

1 it consists of artificial graphical marks on a durable surface

- 2 its purpose is to communicate something
- this purpose is achieved by virtue of the marks' conventional relation to language

The "forerunners of writing." continues, (for example, tally marks and knotted ropes used for record keeping). meet some, but not all of these qualifications (Coulmas 17). pictures used in winter counts consist of durable graphical marks and communicate information. However. there appears to be little or no linguistic intervention between the thoughts and symbols (i.e. The pictures represent concepts rather than specific spoken language.). Therefore, because they are characterized by two, but not all three of qualifications above. the Siouan wintercounts could be classified as "forerunners" to written language. Of course, these symbols did not develop into writing, at least not as the term is defined by most scholars. "Writing" is usually defined as "a system of graphic symbols that can be used to convey any and all thought" (Robinson 53). While some scholars of writing systems would classify many of writing's precursors as "writing". because thev theoretically be developed into a system which is able to represent any concept conceivable (Robinson 211). most scholars, instead, call these seemingly incomplete systems "proto-writing."

In some instances, proto-writing (such as the use of Sumerian token impressions), has eventually led to writing, but in many other cases it has not. What is the general pattern of development for writing systems? Again, Coulmas provides an answer. He

classifies this development into two levels: word writing (pleremic) and sound writing in which a symbol represents the sound associated with an rather than idea the idea itself (cenemic)⁴. Due to their aforementioned failure to meet the third fundamental characteristic of writing. American pictographs such as those found in winter counts can only be examined in relation to Coulmas' first level of writing development. following is Coulmas' description of this first level:

- 1 Words referring to representable objects are 'written' by drawing the objects in question; a representation of the object stands for a representation of its name.
- 2 Common nouns are represented by a drawing of a typical member of the species, such as a particular bird for the species of birds.
- 3 Words of any kind can be represented by symbols: that is, arbitrarily assigned signs. For example, the number word ,one' can be represented by a single stroke which does not stand for 'one stroke' but for the number word 'one' (59).

Examples of all three of these can be found consistently within each of the winter counts of various Siouan groups.

Examples of direct representation of objects by pictures of those objects can be found in all of the winter counts examined⁵. The symbols in figure 1 were used in one or more counts⁶.

Examples of the second group, common nouns, represented by typical members of their category, can also be found in numerous winter counts (see symbols in figure 2).

Examples of words of any kind, arbitrarily and consistently being assigned signs, can also be readily

found, including those signs for objects and concepts (see symbols in figure 3).

Were the Siouan groups of the northern Plains on their way to developing a system of writing? As shown, within their hide counts pictures did exist to directly represent words, common nouns represented by typical members, and arbitrarily assigned signs to represent words of any kind, and the counts themselves were artificial marks durable surfaces used on communicate information. All of these characteristics are quite similar to those of many precursors to established systems. and meet requirements of the first level of a general pattern in writing development. However. because of European interference, the symbols of the winter counts were never allowed to continue on their path of development. It will. therefore, never be known whether that path would have stopped where it was, eventually led to a writing system, or taken another direction entirely.

ENDNOTES

¹Other groups also had winter counts, but they were not as easily obtainable by this researcher. ²An example of this type of study can be seen in "Western Dakota Winter Counts: An Analysis of the Effects of Westward Migration and Culture Change." by Elizabeth R. P. Henning. *Plains Anthropologist*, Vol. 27, No. 95, pp. 57-65, 1982. ³Many of these complications are explained by Melburn D. Thurman's article "Plains Indian Winter Counts and the New Ethnohistory." *Plains Anthropologist*, Vol. 27, No. 96, pp. 271-272, 1982

⁴Rebus symbols are an example of cenemic writing.

SAs is the case with many early recording systems, these pictures are often simplified, but still recognizable.

⁶The following code can be used in determining the source of each symbol:

- 1. Indian Record Keeping: Lone Dog's Winter Count 1800-1871 —A 70 Year Calendar of the Dakota Nation. Map. Salt Lake City, UT: William M. Rieske. 1982.
- 2. Howard, James H. The British Museum Winter Count. British Museum

Occasional Paper No. 4. London: British Museum, 1979.

Wildhage. Die Wilhelm. Winterzahlungen der Oglala. Wyk auf Foehr: Verlag for Amerikanistik, 1988.

4. Praus, Alexis. The Sioux, 1798-1922: A Dakota Winter Count. Cranbrook Institute of Science.

Bulletin Number 44. Bloomfield Hills, MI: Cranbrook Institute of Science, 1962.

Wildhage, Wilhelm. The Big Missouri-Kills Two Winter Count. Archiv fur Volkerkunde, 45. Selbstverlag: "Freunde der Volkerkunde", 1991.

⁷All four of these symbols depict the same meteor

shower in 1833.

These name signs, themselves, are usually direct representations. However, the fact that they represent names in these instances causes them to be included in this category.

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Wildhage, Wilhelm.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1.

various dwellings























buffalo



2











1

- 2. Howard, James H. <u>The British Museum Winter Count</u>. British Museum Occasional Paper No. 4. London: British Museum. 1979.
- 3. Wildhage, Wilhelm. <u>Die Winterzählungen der Oglala</u>. Wyk auf Foehr: Verlag für Amerikanistik, 1988.
- 4. Praus, Alexis. <u>The Sioux, 1798-1922: A Dakota Winter Count</u>. Cranbrook Institute of Science, Bulletin Number 44. Bloomfield Hills, MI: Cranbrook Institute of Science, 1962.
- 5. Wildhage, Wilhelm. <u>The Biq Missouri-Kills Two Winter Count</u>. Archiv für Völkerkunde, 45. Selbstverlag: "Freunde der Völkerkunde", 1991.

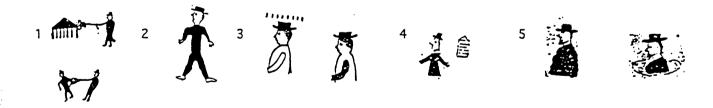
Figure 2.

Birds (including eagles, crows, etc. which all look more or less the same)



Man with hat used to signify any white man

1



Standardized 'person' symbol to which other symbols are attached for specification



