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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, have various types of graphical representation. One such example is the Siouan<sup>1</sup> winter counts, pictures recorded once each winter on buffalo hide (or later on cloth) which served as 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 groups<sup>2</sup>. Despite the facts that only one important or unusual event is depicted each year, and that the accompanying verbal interpretations can be fraught with complications<sup>3</sup>, 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 the precursors of established writing 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

- 3 this purpose is achieved by virtue of the marks' conventional relation to language

The "forerunners of writing," he continues, (for example, tally marks and knotted ropes used for record keeping), meet some, but not all of these qualifications (Coulmas 17). The 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 the qualifications above, 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 they could *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 idea rather than the idea itself (cenemic)<sup>4</sup>. Due to their aforementioned failure to meet the third fundamental characteristic of writing, Native American pictographs such as those found in winter counts can only be examined in relation to Coulmas' first level of writing development. The 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 examined<sup>5</sup>. The symbols in figure 1 were used in one or more counts<sup>6</sup>.

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 on durable surfaces used to communicate information. All of these characteristics are quite similar to those of many precursors to established writing systems, and meet the 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

<sup>1</sup>Other groups also had winter counts, but they were not as easily obtainable by this researcher.

<sup>2</sup>An 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.

<sup>3</sup>Many 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

<sup>4</sup>Rebus symbols are an example of cenemic writing.

<sup>5</sup>As is the case with many early recording systems, these pictures are often simplified, but still recognizable.

<sup>6</sup>The 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.

3. Wildhage, Wilhelm. *Die 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.

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

<sup>7</sup>All four of these symbols depict the same meteor shower in 1833.

<sup>8</sup>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.

1982 *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.

Praus, Alexis.

1962 *The Sioux, 1798-1922: A Dakota Winter Count*. Cranbrook Institute of Science, Bulletin Number 44. Bloomfield Hills, MI: Cranbrook Institute of Science.

Robinson, Andrew.

1995 *The Story of Writing: Alphabets, Hieroglyphs and Pictograms*. New York: Thames and Hudson Inc.

Wildhage, Wilhelm.

1988 *Die Winterzahlungen der Oglala*. Wyk auf Foehr: Verlag fur Amerikanistik.

Wildhage, Wilhelm.

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

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1989 *The Writing Systems of the World*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

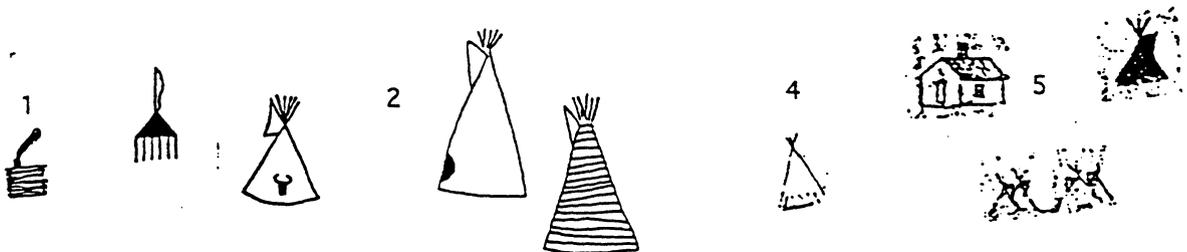
Howard, James H.

1979 *The British Museum Winter Count*. British Museum Occasional Paper No. 4. London: British Museum.

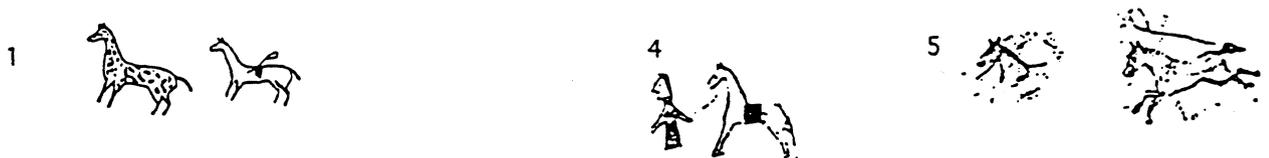
## APPENDIX

Figure 1.

various dwellings



horses



buffalo



2. Howard, James H. The British Museum Winter Count. British Museum Occasional Paper No. 4. London: British Museum, 1979.

3. Wildhage, Wilhelm. Die Winterzählungen der Ojibwa. Wyk auf Foehr: Verlag für 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.

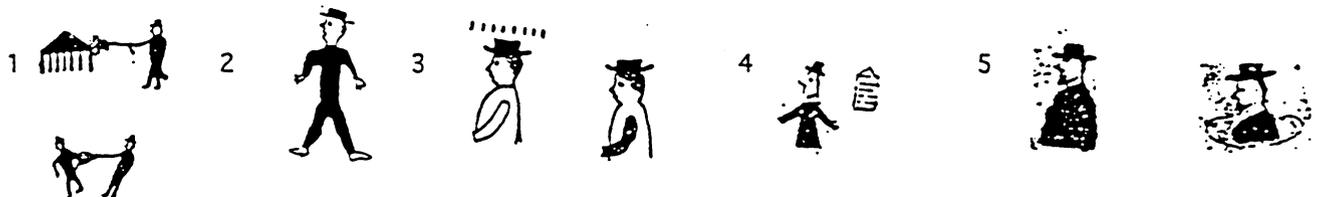
5. Wildhage, Wilhelm. The Big Missouri-Kills Two Winter Count. Archiv für Völkerkunde, 45. Selbstverlag: "Freunde der Völkerkunde", 1991.

**Figure 2.**

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



Man with hat used to signify any white man



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

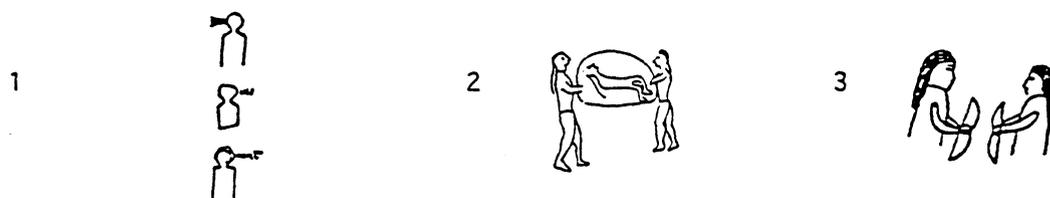
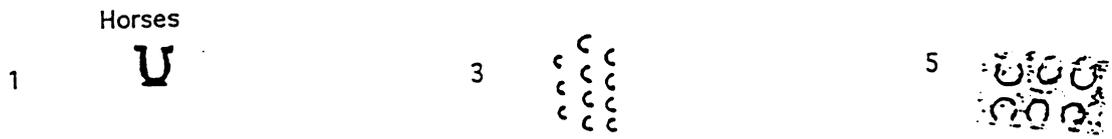


Figure 3.

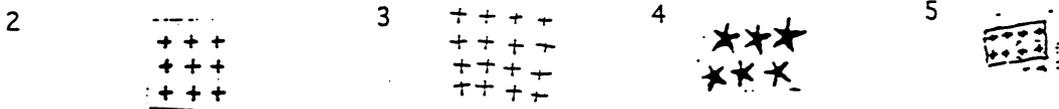


killed in battle

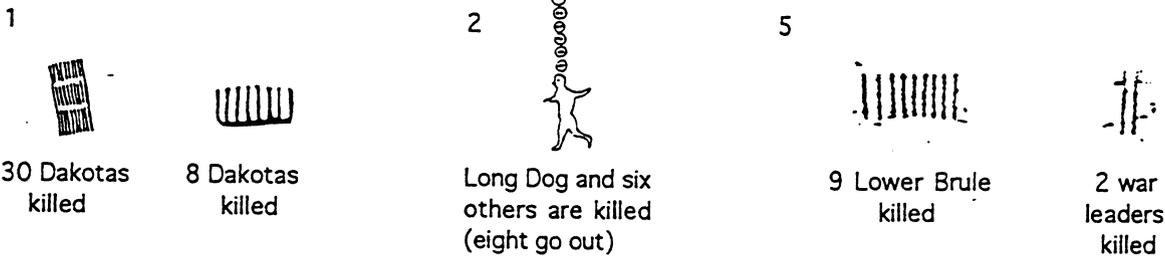


(the symbol  is used throughout this source and consistently represents the concept of being killed in battle)

stars<sup>7</sup>



the dead



sacred feast



(the symbol  is also consistently used throughout source 2 to represent sacred feasts)

Objects used alone to indicate names



Objects added to typical people figures (such as short hair or ponytail to depict enemies, specific name signs<sup>8</sup>, and disease spots to indicate disease)

