

# Researches Into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization (1878)

a "rebus," as where Prior Burton's name is sculptured in St. Saviour's Church as a cask with a thistle on it, "burr-tun." Indeed, the puzzles of this kind in children's books keep alive to our own day the great transition stage from picture-writing to word-writing, the highest intellectual effort of one period in our history coming down, as so often happens, to be the child's play of a later time.

M. Aubin may be considered as the discoverer of these phonetic signs in the Mexican pictures, or at least he is the first who has worked them out systematically and published a list of them.<sup>1</sup> But the ancient written interpretations have been standing for centuries to prove their existence.



Fig. 11.

Thus, in the Mendoza Codex, the name of a place, pictured as in Fig. 11 by a fishing-net and teeth, is interpreted Matlatlan, that is "Net-Place." Now, *matla(tl)* means a net, and so far the name is a picture, but the teeth, *tlan(tli)*, are used, not pictorially but phonetically, for *tlan*, place. Other more complicated names, such as Acolma, Quauhpanoayan, etc., are written in like manner in phonetic symbols in the same document.<sup>2</sup>

There is no sufficient reason to make us doubt that this purely phonetic writing was of native Mexican origin, and after the Spanish Conquest they turned it to account in a new and curious way. The Spanish missionaries, when embarrassed by the difficulty of getting the converts to remember their Ave Marias and Paternosters, seeing that the words were of course mere nonsense to them, were helped out by the Indians themselves, who substituted Aztec words as near in sound as might be to the Latin, and wrote down the pictured equivalents for these words, which enabled them to remember the required formulas. Torquemada and Las Casas have recorded two instances of this device, that *Pater noster* was written by a flag (*pantli*) and a prickly pear (*nochtli*), while the sign of water, *a(tl)*, combined with that of aloe, *me(tl)*, made a compound word

<sup>1</sup> Aubin, in 'Revue Orientale et Américaine,' vols. iii.-v. Brasseur, 'Hist. des Nat. Civ. du Mexique et de l'Amérique Centrale,' Paris, 1857-9, vol. i. An attempt to prove the existence of something more nearly approaching alphabetic signs (Rev., vol. iv. p. 276-7; Brasseur, p. lxxiii.) requires much clearer evidence.

<sup>2</sup> Kingsborough, vol. i., and Expl. in vol. vi.

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