

# MESOAMERICAN GRAFFITI

*After 1,000 years of silence the stone inscriptions  
of the ancient Maya have begun to tell their tales*

BY VERNON SCARBOROUGH

## BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

by Michael D. Coe

Thames and Hudson, 1992

304 pages; \$24.95 hardcover, \$14.95 softcover

## MAYA COSMOS: THREE THOUSAND YEARS ON THE SHAMAN'S PATH

by David Freidel, Linda Schele and Joy Parker

William Morrow and Company, 1993

543 pages; \$30.00

IF TEXAS WERE ABANDONED TODAY AND CULTURE as we know it were not permitted to return to the landscape for a thousand years, what legacy would Texans leave? What would remain if all the libraries were allowed to crumble, the books and software lost to worms? What if the Ewings of Dallas were forced to relocate their fortune to Chicago and the San Antonio Spurs to play an altered form of basketball in New York City? And what about everyone else? Where would they go?

However small the chances for such a disaster, a collapse of similar magnitude did take place in a preindustrial context less than a thousand miles south of San Antonio more than a millennium ago, on the southern half of the Yucatán Peninsula. Although the precipitous fall of the ancient Maya civilization around A.D. 900 remains an enigma, it is but one of the many unsolved mysteries that continue to fire scholarly activity about the most literate of indigenous cultures in the New World.

Perhaps the best-known scholarly work on the Maya in recent years has been a number of remarkable advances—what Michael D. Coe, the curator of anthropology at the Peabody Museum of Yale University, in *Breaking the Maya Code*, calls a breakthrough—in the decipherment of ancient Maya texts. Much of the public attention to the decipherment has focused on the astonishingly precocious career of David Stuart, who delivered his first scholarly paper on a Maya glyph at the age of twelve, the summer before he was to begin junior high school. To give just one example of Stuart's sweet discoveries, one of the glyphs he deciphered

spelled out the three phonetic syllables *ca-ca-u*, which he identified as cacao, or chocolate. Sometime later, as Coe recalls it, archaeologists excavated a pot with a screw-on top, bearing an inscription of the owner's name and the *ca-ca-u* glyph. The residue from the jar's bottom was sent to the Hershey Foods Corporation for analysis. There the chemists could make no mistake: the scrapings were chocolate.

But, as Coe makes clear, Stuart shares credit with the senior linguist Floyd G. Lounsbury of Yale University, the artist and Maya scholar Linda Schele of the University of Texas at Austin, and a number of other "young Turks." That group of epigraphers—scholars who study inscriptions—has made major contributions to a decipherment that, by some estimates, makes it possible to read 85 percent of the Maya texts in one or another Maya language. Of the 800 signs catalogued in Maya hieroglyphic script, between 200 and 300 were probably in use at any one time, and 150 of the 800 are known to stand for the sounds of syllables or shorter phonetic sounds.

The success of the decipherment has led to something of a rift between the epigraphers and the "dirt" archaeologists. The latter dismiss the epigraphers for the alleged irrelevance of the newfound ability to read inscriptions of the Maya ruling class (for those are what survive); the epigraphers respond that the field archaeologists are only crying sour grapes.

BUT DECIPHERMENT HAS BEEN THE GLAMOROUS stepchild of archaeology and, probably for that reason, the most contentious of its offspring. The success of the recent work owes an enormous debt to Russian epigrapher Yuri Valentinovich Knorosov, who sought to find the sounds of words, syllables or letters in the Maya glyphs. Yet for half a century the English Maya scholar J. Eric S. Thompson of the Carnegie Institution of Washington so "dominated modern Maya studies by sheer force of intellect and personality," as Coe puts it, that he had a chilling effect on the search for sounds in the glyphs.

Thompson argued that the glyphs covering so many of the Maya ruins could only be read as ideas—never uttered—and therefore could not be transliterated as spoken language. The glyphs were, instead, ideographs, signs conveying the ideas but not the sounds of a language. Thompson dismissed Knorosov's approach not only as wrongheaded, but also as a



misguided example of Marxist-Leninist methodology. The fact that Knorosov never made any claims for Soviet ideological superiority, not to mention the fact that Knorosov turned out to be correct, never dissuaded Thompson from increasingly vitriolic attacks on the Russian.

The imposing figure of Eric Thompson also haunts *Maya Cosmos*, by the Maya scholars David Freidel and Linda Schele (of decipherment fame) and the writer Joy Parker. But in that book some of Thompson's central theories are imbued with new life. What is known about the ancient Maya, after all, has been gleaned from several scholarly approaches—only one of which is epigraphy. The recent decipherments have thrown open a new window on the Maya, but they by no means admit the only light. The thesis of Freidel, Schele and Parker's book is that Thompson's emphasis on the astronomical, calendrical, religious and even mystical aspects of Maya life still merits study, and they skillfully connect the religions of the modern Maya to the ancient. But each of the books under review indicates the necessity of widening the frame of reference for epigraphy. Indeed, it seems clear that understanding the complexity of any society, including the Maya, demands the cooperation and focused skills of many thinkers and many orientations.

**T**HE MAYA CIVILIZATION DOMINATED THE limestone shelf of the Yucatán Peninsula, the mountainous regions of highland Guatemala and the Mexican state of Chiapas from 1000 B.C. until roughly A.D. 1500. Archaeologists divide that time into three periods—the pre-Classic (1000 B.C. until A.D. 250), when the first pyramids were built; the Classic (A.D. 250 until 900), the pinnacle of Maya civilization; and the post-Classic (900 until 1500), a time of diminished centralization of power and resources.

The Maya were skilled farmers and, perforce, adept at manipulating their limited water resources. About a third of the southern Maya lowlands—Belize, northern Guatemala, adjacent portions of Honduras and the Mexican states of Chiapas, Campeche and Quintana Roo—is wetlands, a condition that pushed the Maya toward drained-field agriculture and the cultivation of crops on the edges of swamps, as well as slash-and-burn agriculture.

The Classic period was characterized by political centralization and large, spacious cities surrounded with a dispersed yet abundant rural population. By the end of the

Classic period, the lowland population may have reached ten million, a number perhaps twice as large as the current Maya population. That density prompted the development of well-defined economic and political divisions between individuals and groups. The nobility commissioned skilled artisans to produce politically motivated art and architecture; merchants imported luxury goods to the major cities of the lowlands from manufacturers hundreds of miles away.

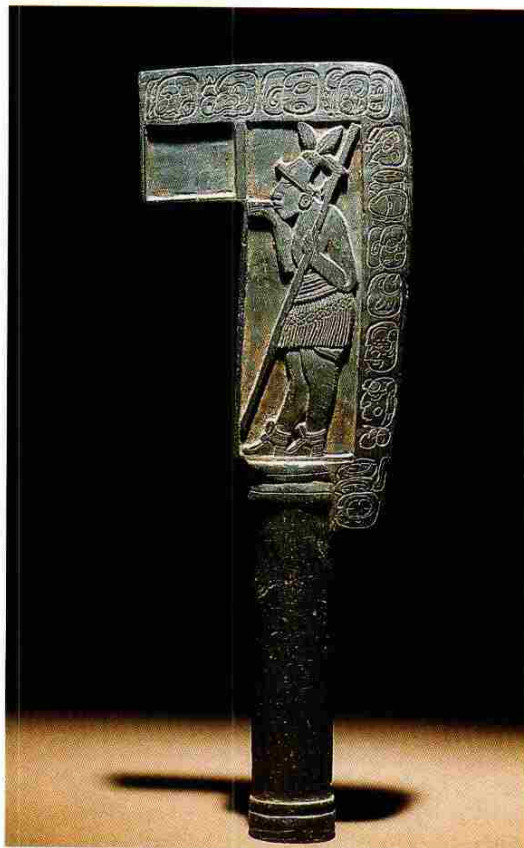
**T**HE COLLAPSE OF THE MAYA AT THE END OF the Classic period was the outcome of a number of adverse conditions acting at the same time: war; climate change; interrupted trading networks; environmental degradation, probably induced by practices such as slash-and-burn agriculture; population pressures on critical resources such as water. The exact mix of factors, as well as how they varied from region to region, is not known. What is known is that as many as 90 percent of the Maya relocated, leaving such great centers as Palenque and Tikal and fleeing to the hinterlands or farther north on the Yucatán. The political and economic cohesion of the Classic period was lost.

The post-Classic society of the Maya was quite different from that of the Classic period. The trappings seemed similar—imposing pyramids, courts for the popular game of hipball—but the material underpinnings were based less on civic monuments and rigidly defined social controls than they were on portable objects of wealth held by a ruling

elite made up of a merchant nobility. By the time the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century, the Maya were quite unlike their forebears of A.D. 700.

The first modern glimpse of the Maya ruins reported to Western audiences came through the eyes of the lawyer John Lloyd Stephens and the artist Frederick Catherwood in the early 1840s. Their exploration in "Mayaland" resulted in the extremely popular book, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán*, which introduced the English-speaking world to a poorly understood and seemingly exotic ancient civilization. Since then, private individuals, universities and other research institutions have accelerated the contemporary understanding of the Maya. But even today, in a world linked by modems and satellites, the scholarly assessment of what the Maya actually accomplished continues to evolve.

Coe's book is a lively and highly personal narrative of the history of the scholarly decipherment of Maya script from



Slate Ax (Hunahpu Dressed as Hunter), Mayan, A.D. 650–850



the Classic period. He captures the intensity and discipline needed for the slow, sometimes fitful pace of scholarship—a pace often controlled, sometimes even hindered, by academic and political intrigue. Skillfully weaving the linguistic logic of each advance in scholarship with its historical context, he provides a rudimentary background in the history of deciphering ancient languages that allows the lay reader to participate in the excitement of the intellectual chase.

COE PLACES THE ANCIENT MAYA IN THE COMPANY of other great world civilizations—Chinese, Greek, Japanese, Sumerian—and he argues that all writing systems are phonetic to varying degrees. That observation has only recently been widely embraced by Mayanists, despite more than a century of epigraphic examination. At the turn of the twentieth century, a few American and French scholars did consider Maya glyphic texts similar to other early writing systems. But a strong and articulate group of Germans suggested that the script was semasiographic—made up of signs that are independent of the sounds of speech. (The Arabic numerals 1, 2, 3 and so forth can be regarded as semasiographs, insofar as they are equally understood by the speakers of different languages. Thus to Spanish speakers they signify *uno, dos, tres*, whereas to English speakers they signify *one, two, three*.) But semasiographs have limited utility for communication and, Coe argues, could never, by themselves, constitute a fully expressive human language. In any event, the German scholars focused on elucidating the calendrical and astronomical dimensions of Maya glyphs, rather than on fundamental decipherment.

In that German scholarly tradition, Thompson too emphasized the role of the calendar and astronomical obser-

THOMPSON BECAME  
*a formidable obstacle to the idea that  
the glyphs could be mere sounds.*

ventions. He was a superb iconographer (one who studies and interprets ancient illustrations), and his book *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: An Introduction*, published in 1950, is still assigned in classrooms. Indeed, for nearly fifty years Thompson was an institution unto himself in Maya studies, and so it is with mixed emotions that Coe balances enthusiasm for Thompson's skilled work with criticism of his dogmatic theories of Maya religion and society.

But Coe is quite clear in his view that Thompson's "semi-mystical and pseudo-literary" style confused more than illuminated the understanding of Maya script. Thompson was searching for a higher truth embedded in the glyphs, and he became a formidable obstacle to the idea that they could be mere sounds or parts of speech, rather than images. Arguing against the prosaic, phonetic explanation for Maya writing, Thompson asserted that the Maya elite had practiced a form of monotheism—which he regarded as an advanced form of religious belief. The belief in one god,

he felt, could be clarified through a deeper examination of the mystical meanings and allusions posed by the glyphs themselves. Thompson's bias evolved into the popular view that the Maya were peaceful stargazers who worshiped atop grand but vacant ceremonial centers. (The idea of huge empty spaces devoted to worship arose because of the lack of survey data from the jungle-engulfed cities.) Thompson spent years filling in the details of his theory and defending it from detractors.

Thompson's background may have strongly influenced his theories. He was born in 1898, the younger son of a London doctor who was a member of the upper middle class. As a teenager he lied about his age to join the London Scottish Regiment during the First World War. After the war he worked for four years as a gaucho on his family's ranch in Argentina. There he learned to speak Spanish fluently. Coe suggests Thompson and his family reacted strongly to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and the influence it had on far-away Argentina. Perhaps his search for priestly axioms hidden in the ancient Maya script was predictable, given his core belief in an atheistic communist menace.

IT IS ONE OF THE IRONIES OF AMERICANIST SCHOLARSHIP that two Russians—one native, the other an early immigrant to the United States—were the first to successfully challenge Thompson's dogmatism. Yet not until his death in 1975 was decipherment really permitted to accelerate. Knorosov, though isolated in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) and without the resources available to Thompson, argued as early as 1952 that the Maya script was phonetic and syllabic. Knorosov based his theory on a sixteenth-century account of the post-Conquest Yucatán by the Franciscan bishop Fray Diego de Landa.

Bishop Landa had zealously tried to drive the devil off the Yucatán peninsula. He burned several thousand "idols" and dozens of Maya books, but he also attempted to devise a Maya syllabary based on Spanish. Landa's work was dismissed by Thompson and the German school as being hopelessly flawed, but Knorosov demonstrated that Landa's work could be a key to the ancient glyphs. Landa's book, though oddly skewed and hardly exhaustive of the complexity and breadth of Maya writing, proved to be the Rosetta stone for Maya epigraphy. In the hands of Knorosov—whose familiarity with other ancient writing systems as well as with linguistics made him far more adept than Thompson in those disciplines—Landa's work was all that was needed to take a groundbreaking step forward.

The other Russian scholar was Tatiana Proskouriakoff, a naturalized citizen who became Thompson's colleague at the Carnegie Institution of Washington. Born into a family of scientists, Proskouriakoff combined her interests in art and science and earned her degree in architecture. Perhaps because of her respect for Thompson, she focused less on the ancient Maya language and more on the structure of the ruins. But in 1960 she published an elegant paper showing that many of the stelae standing in the great Maya plazas and lining the lower margins of acropolises and pyramids were carved with statements of dynastic history—births, ascensions and deaths of Maya lords. Her revelation turned Maya epigraphy on its head, away from higher truth



and astronomical readings, and toward history—albeit that of only an elite segment of society.

Many scholars are responsible for the current understanding of Maya script, but one name appears everywhere—Linda Schele. According to Coe, Schele is a “born showwoman” and an irrepressible advocate of Maya studies. She earned her degree in fine arts, took a life-changing vacation to the ancient Maya city of Palenque, and switched her study from art to epigraphy. In 1973 she and Peter Mathews of the University of Calgary took the dynastic approach pioneered by Proskouriakoff, combined it with Knorosov’s phonetic analysis, and began to reconstruct the entire dynastic sequence of Palenque.

What all scientists know but acknowledge only reluctantly is the role of personality and politics in the search for knowledge. The social sciences—no less so than the phys-

itive of advances in epigraphy—as “illiterate” in the Maya script, a pejorative adjective in any scholarly circle. The immediate retort of the archaeologists is that epigraphers are elitists and are simply attempting to free their own biases and fears by communicating with that other small percentage of nobility resting mute in the jungles of Central America; epigraphers have little interest in the mundane.

**I**F COE DEMOLISHES THOMPSON’S IMAGE, FREIDEL, Schele and Parker, in *Maya Cosmos*, partly rehabilitate it by returning to the subject of ancient Maya religion. Their account is at once provocative and highly readable. Freidel, an accomplished field archaeologist who has successfully directed two major field expeditions in the Maya lowlands, provides the archaeological context for many of the authors’ interpretations, and he



Three Transformation Figures, or Soul Spirits (*Wayobs*), Rollout of Mayan Vase, A.D. 650–850

ical sciences—strive for the objective assessment of data drawn according to well-prescribed methods. Unfortunately, scholarship is never that cut-and-dried. And though Coe has his own biases (he is an influential and articulate Mesoamerican archaeologist in his own right), his personal familiarity with many of the players in Maya studies provides an important perspective for understanding the scholarly development of the discipline.

*Breaking the Maya Code* focuses on the epigraphic record, but there is a recurrent impression that Coe is treating the totality of Maya archaeology. He aims several barbs at the archaeological community when he discusses the dichotomy between practicing field archaeologists and the epigraphers, a somewhat unnecessary polemic that plays into the same difficulties Coe has identified from the “Age of Thompson.” I have heard some of my colleagues refer to field archaeologists—even those who are highly apprecia-

brings to the team his well-developed interest in ethnography and religion. Schele contributes her respected epigraphic and iconographic expertise, and Parker is a talented editor and writer.

Woven throughout the history of epigraphic and iconographic discovery are recurrent themes, and Thompson’s practice of searching for higher truth by sampling ethnographic snapshots reemerges in this volume. The monotheism that he noted in the Classic period Maya is realized in the character of the almighty Itzamna, or reptile house, a spiritual presence that essentially encloses every manifestation of the Maya world view. The earth was the house of the creature; all people lived in it. Thompson concluded that for the Maya elite, the worship of Itzamna was the guiding system of belief, but he regarded the rest of the Maya—both past and present—as practicing a primitive magical folk religion that was quite separate from



the “civilizing” influence of the developing monotheism.

Freidel, Schele and Parker also suggest an overarching monotheism for the ancient elite, but they extend that fundamental world view to all the Maya, elite and commoner alike. That assumption gives them access to the ancient religion through the study of contemporary Maya practices, since the present-day Maya of the Yucatán are the direct descendants of the Maya of the Classic period. The most powerful and brilliant section of *Maya Cosmos* appears in the second chapter, “The Hearth and the Tree: Maya Creation.” Inspired by Schele’s years of familiarity with Maya epigraphy and iconography, the argument makes essential reference to portions of an ancient epic, the *Popol Vuh*, or “Book of Counsel,” understood to be the most important native work of New World literature. The book recounts the genesis of life from primordial chaos until the arrival of the Spaniards, with especially graphic passages that recount the exploits of two pairs of divinely born Hero Twins. Classic period allusions to the trials and triumphs of the Hero Twins are widespread on burial urns, with frequent references to hipball and to the Otherworld, or Xibalbá (*she-bal-BA*), a dark, fetid place where the duo travel before rebirth and spiritual ascension.

SCHOLE ARGUES THAT THE INSPIRATION AND confirmation of Maya creation—as well as related portions of the *Popol Vuh*—are mirrored in the night sky, particularly in the Milky Way and in the constellations of stars important to the Maya. As if to exemplify the theme of community cooperation, repeatedly emphasized in the *Popol Vuh*, several gods work together to lift the “Lying-down Sky,” an act that introduces light to the world and generates the Milky Way, the “Raised-up Sky,” or the World Tree. It is by way of the World Tree that the “First Father” of creation enters the heavens. The fires of creation are lit in the three hearth stones of the sky: the three prominent stars in the belt of the constellation Orion. Schele supports her account of the Maya creation myth by citing a dazzling array of Classic period panels, pots and associated texts.

Somewhat later on, Freidel, Schele and Parker introduce the recently deciphered glyphic translation of the ancient Maya’s concept of *waay*, which the authors assert is the same as the present-day native concept of *nagual*. *Waay* was an animal companion spirit appearing in many guises in Classic Maya imagery. Both *nagual* and *waay* can inhabit sacred objects as well as individuals. Freidel, Schele and Parker find connections between the concept of *waay* and the views of the soul held by the modern Maya groups, the Tzotzil and the Quiché. Pursuing another lavish image, the authors also see an association between the ancient and modern concepts of the World Tree, as depicted in various mediums. Those interpretations, fundamental in the decipherment of Maya glyphs, are further developed in subsequent chapters treating ritual dance, warfare and the role played by the Maya ball game. Although the effect of the discussion is partly to re-imbue the ancient Maya with a Thompionesque, stargazing quality, they also emerge as a distinctly violent, warlike civilization.

*Maya Cosmos* unashamedly presents whatever patterns of data come into focus through eyes of Freidel, Schele and

Parker. And perhaps because the book is targeted at a broad audience, including the New Age reader, such patterns of data include a number of author epiphanies, which impart the excitement of discovery. But such instances of personal revelation also highlight the limitations of any one person’s ability to speak for someone else’s society—living or dead. Anthropology has always wrestled with the issue of the observer’s objectivity, but when religion is the subject, objectivity becomes even more difficult than usual. Whose voice is heard—that of the ancient Maya, or that of a contemporary author—when the reader is told, “Waqibal [the center] truly was and is hallowed ground and in my heart I centered the world”? How is the reader to interpret Parker’s anecdotal comments suggesting that her own whirling movements, as she practices her Sufi trance states, say anything informative about ancient Maya dance?



Freidel, Schele and Parker insist they are witnesses, not voices of authority. But the voice throughout the book is a self-assured one, showing little hesitation. Statements of truth roll by with little or no qualifiers: “Every major political activity in their lives . . . required the capture and sacrifice of rival peers.” “With that discovery, I realized that every major image from Maya cosmic symbolism was probably a map of the sky.” The importance of human sacrifice is undeniable, and Freidel, Schele and Parker have presented a compelling case for the significance of the heavens in Maya symbolism. But given the lessons of the sometimes flamboyant history of scholarly activity in Maya studies, a flexibility in interpretation and a humility in purpose may best serve the discipline. Theories are not truth, a message that has been clearly demonstrated in the past two decades.



**I**F TEXAS WERE ABANDONED, WOULD THE INTERIOR lobbies of fancy hotels, the gleaming veneer of empty skyscrapers, the carved marble tombstones be enough to tell its story? The breakthroughs in Maya epigraphy and imagery have been exhilarating, but other fields of study have yet to be incorporated with the new wealth of textual data. Instead of widening the gulf between epigraphers and field archaeologists, perhaps the two camps could ask mutually addressable questions of each other. Why not place the epigraphic record in the material context and assess economic and ecological concerns? Given the care and reverence for land and water by living Maya, what kinds of question might be asked? Was all cosmological symbolism tied to the Milky Way? Or could the great swamps that made up as much as 40 percent of the Maya heartland and the associated uplands—

community organization of the Maya to the complexity of stone-tool production and of consumption practices are being examined as well as the relationships between communities—both rural and urban—as they coped with a fragile and unforgiving environment.

**I**T WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE TO CHARACTERIZE THE Maya universe and how it came to be without drawing from all available resources. Epigraphy and iconography are strong lenses, but they require the corrective vision of many supplemental lenses, both large and small. Gone, certainly, are the peaceful stargazers tirelessly tracking the passage of time and pondering messages from the starry sky. In their place has settled a much less prosaic people with a long history of wars, human sacrifice, obsessions with the material world and political subterfuge.



*The Hero Twins (Hunahpu and Xbalanke) Confronting Itzamna (God of the Underworld), Rollout of Mayan Vase, A.D. 650–850*

with their underworld water table and spectacular caverns—be sources of terrestrial inspiration?

Recently a colleague of mine at the University of Cincinnati, the linguist Andrew Hofling, and I have been studying the issue of seasonality. We have suggested that the ancient glyphs associated with warfare were inscribed primarily during the dry season. But capture glyphs—indicating isolated capture of individuals by raiding parties—were inscribed year round. More data must be examined, but our working hypothesis is that major battles were fought over the possession of land and water during the dry season, when resources were most stressed. The capture of a person, on the other hand, required only an element of surprise and could be done at any time.

Maya archaeology is not limited to the deciphering of ancient texts. Currently, subjects ranging from the com-

Although epigraphy has provided a wealth of new information about the governing elite, it can only benefit from gazing outward to other facets of archaeology. Truth frequently occupies the land in the middle, and the specialist in soils or in hydraulic engineering may prove to be as significant as the epigraphers in elucidating the many strata of Maya society. Because no one person can possibly command all the tools necessary to address the scale and complexity of a civilization, all channels of scholarly communication need to open for the world of the ancient Maya truly to be understood. ●

*VERNON SCARBOROUGH is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Cincinnati and the director of the Ancient Maya Water Management Project. He was also the coeditor of ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF WATER MANAGEMENT IN THE PRE-HISPANIC NEW WORLD, published by JAI Press in December 1993.*