

SOME RECENT BOOKS ON MAYA HIEROGLYPHIC WRITING

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- THE CORPUS OF MAYA HIEROGLYPHIC INSCRIPTIONS*. Volume 1 by IAN GRAHAM. Volume 2, Part 1 by IAN GRAHAM and ERIC VON EUW. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975. Pp. 62, 64. \$7.50 each.)
- TEXTOS MAYAS DE BELICE Y QUINTANA ROO*. By ORTWIN SMAILUS. (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1975. Pp. 293.)
- DECIPHERING THE MAYA SCRIPT*. By DAVID HUMISTON KELLEY. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976. Pp. 334. \$27.50.)
- EMBLEM AND STATE IN THE CLASSIC MAYA LOWLANDS*. By JOYCE MARCUS. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1976. Pp. 203. \$13.50.)
- LORDS OF THE UNDERWORLD*. By MICHAEL D. COE. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978. \$45.00.)
- THE ART, ICONOGRAPHY, AND DYNASTIC HISTORY OF PALENQUE, PART I*. Edited by MERLE GREENE. (Pebble Beach, Calif.: The Robert Louis Stevenson School, 1976. Pp. 230.)

In the long history of Maya research few endeavors have been the subject of such concentrated effort as the decipherment of the hieroglyphic writing. The early years of scholarship were mainly devoted to the elicitation of the mechanics of the calendar, work on which culminated in important publications by Forstemann, Goodman, and others, and, later, with the work of Sylvanus Morley dealing with the inscriptions of Copan (1920) and the Peten (1937). Meanwhile, J. Eric S. Thompson had begun his prolific output of monographs dealing with the hieroglyphic writing, and in 1950 published the monumental summary of work to that date—*Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: An Introduction*. Although some scholars, notably Bowditch (1901) and Morley himself (1915), had hinted at the probability of some historical matter in the hieroglyphic texts, no one pursued the question until the late 1950s. In 1958, Heinrich Berlin published his study of a certain kind of sign which he termed “emblem glyphs.” These, he noted, because of position in individual texts and their more or less site-specific clustering, appeared to stand for either the placenames of sites or designations for the lineages that ruled those sites in the Classic period. Soon afterwards Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1960)

published compelling evidence that the Classic Maya inscriptions contained historical material related to rulers and dynasties. The focus of her study was Piedras Negras and from the inscriptions there she isolated glyphs that appeared to stand for birth and for accession to office. These event glyphs were located in calendrical frameworks that appeared to represent actual lifespans of rulers. The two papers by Berlin and Proskouriakoff served to change the entire direction of glyphic research.

Meanwhile, the fifties had also witnessed the beginning of the important studies by the Russian linguist Yuri Knorosov who, beginning with Bishop Landa's much maligned "alphabet," proposed that the Classic Maya writing system exhibited true phoneticism, a point that had been steadfastly denied up to that time. Knorosov was able to show that the writing appeared to be a mixed logographic system containing both phonetic and semantic elements as well as a working syllabary. It was Knorosov's contention that Maya words could be represented in the glyphs by two or more consonant-vowel syllables forming a pattern CVCV . . . and that the final vowel, usually equal to that of the initial vowel, was simply dropped. Some of Knorosov's readings were borne out in two notable cases: a glyph on Lintel 8 at Yaxchilan translated as the word *chu-cah* ("conquered" or "was conquered")—the accompanying scene depicts the ruler Bird Jaguar holding a captive; another reading proposed by David H. Kelley following Knorosov's system, revealed the name "Kakupacal," glyphically rendered as *ka-ku-pa-ca-la*, among the inscriptions at Chichén Itzá.

It was in the late fifties and early sixties that Maya epigraphers became more or less divided into two camps. One, represented by Eric Thompson, maintained that Maya writing was not phonetic and that Knorosov's hypothesis, if true, would have produced a continual flow of readings, which it did not seem to be doing. The other camp, represented by David Kelley, saw great possibilities in Knorosov's work and began the long process of testing the phonetic hypothesis.

The decade of the sixties was marked by no great single work on the subject but rather numerous short papers that expanded on the work of Proskouriakoff, Berlin, and Knorosov. It was almost as if an entire decade was necessary to absorb and put in order the various hypotheses dealing with the very nature of Maya writing. At the end of the 1960s another element was injected into Maya study: that was an approach that took fully into consideration the subject of linguistics, drawing upon the various colonial Maya dictionaries and modern Maya as spoken in its thirty-odd dialects across the Yucatán peninsula and its base. At the forefront of this movement was Floyd Lounsbury of Yale University who, carefully taking into account all the current work up to that time, was able to propose some specific readings for some of the glyph elements. It is this unified approach incorporating linguistics,

physical arrangement of glyphs within texts, and careful study of the relationship between texts and scenes and all of the iconographic elements within those scenes that sets the stage for the work of the 1970s.

In retrospect it is astonishing that during all the years of Maya hieroglyphic research before 1975 there was not available to scholars an accurate set of drawings of the corpus of Maya inscriptions. The closest approach to such a tool was the monumental "Archaeology" appendix to the *Biologia Centrali-Americana* published by Alfred Percival Maudslay between 1889 and 1902. Maudslay's work, a volume of text and four folios of plates, brought together for the first time in one publication both photographs and accompanying drawings (the latter by Annie Hunter)—a body of Maya inscriptions from some ten sites from Copan to Palenque to Chichén Itzá. Scholars still rely heavily on Maudslay's work, for there has simply been nothing to compare to it since. Now we are most fortunate to have the beginnings of a great work that will ensure for all time an accurate set of drawings of the extant Maya inscriptions.

One of the most difficult tasks—and those of you who have tried to draw inscriptions know what I mean—is the accurate drawing of a Maya glyphic text. If the artist knows nothing of glyphs and their content, one might argue that the resulting drawing will be quite objective and free of bias. If, on the other hand, the draftsman has a thorough knowledge of glyphs, one might argue equally well that the resulting drawing will contain elements that the artist thinks should be there but perhaps really are not. It is a unique blend of glyph knowledge and extreme caution that excludes doubtful or even marginal glyph elements in eroded areas that marks the volumes that have appeared so far under the title *The Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* issued by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. Volume 1 by Ian Graham, instigator and director of the corpus project, comprises the introduction to the corpus in which is set forth what surely must be the final word on the standards for illustration of Maya monuments. The work also contains useful tables of tun endings, moon age tables, formulas for computation of calendar round positions, and a reprint of the now virtually unobtainable table that Goodman included in the Maudslay publication mentioned above.

Volume 2, part 1, by Ian Graham and Eric Von Euw, puts into practice the high standards so carefully defined in volume 1. The book forms the first of a set dealing with the inscriptions of Naranjo and carries through to Stela 24. Treatment begins with a map of Naranjo in which appear the locations of all the monuments along with a description of the history of research at the site. It is in the main body of this volume that one can see and appreciate the extremely difficult task that Graham has set for himself and his colleagues. The treatment of the

Naranjo stelae consists of pairings of the best available photographs with drawing at the same scale, both accompanied by short texts that deal with location, condition, and the history of the recording of the particular stone. It is in the paired presentation, which allows close visual comparison, that the exactitude of the drawings is most apparent. And it is here that one can see specifically how Graham has so well traveled that thin line between overinterpretation and overcaution in dealing with the carvings. In comparison with most other drawings that have ever been made of Maya carvings of scenes and texts, the Graham and Von Euw drawings stand as monuments of accuracy and of self-discipline—a standard that I hope will be used by future epigraphists. Perhaps the greatest contribution of the corpus volumes, of which eight are now issued, is that they make available many texts or carvings of scenes that are now forever lost through the depredation of looters, who routinely roam the Maya area in search of saleable carvings for the illegal antiquities market. Naranjo in particular has been most thoroughly sacked, and for that reason Graham and Von Euw have had to utilize whatever photographs could be recovered from the Maler files and other sources not readily available to the working scholar. Mayanists are now and will forever be indebted to Graham and his colleagues.

The book by Ortwin Smailus, *Textos Mayas de Belice y Quintana Roo*, represents raw data at the opposite end of the chronological span treated in the *Corpus*. The work comprises a transliteration of modern Yucatec Maya stories, collected in Belize and Quintana Roo State in Mexico, with interlinear translation in Spanish. The usefulness of such a work, in the light of a unified approach to the glyphs that must include modern as well as historical linguistics, cannot be overestimated. In Smailus' texts we find modern linguistic usage that will doubtless make some contribution in terms of syntax or idiom that can be correlated with patterns in the glyphs themselves. Aside from this, the work stands as a compendium of source material for the ethnographer, the folklorist, and the ethnohistorian.

In the bibliography of works dealing with Maya hieroglyphic writing only a few publications stand out as landmark summations along the way of research leading to decipherment. In the past these have included Morley's *Introduction to the Study of Maya Hieroglyphs* (1915); Eric Thompson's *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: An Introduction* (1950, reprinted in 1960 and 1970); and the present work by David H. Kelley, *Deciphering the Maya Script*.

As Kelley notes, the book was some twelve years in the making, a fact that has resulted in some damage to the unity and consistency of the work. In general, however, Kelley's summary stands as the best and most exhaustive overall treatment of the state of the art of Maya hiero-

glyphic research as it stood in the early 1970s. It and the much shorter synthesis by Berlin, “Signos y significados en las inscripciones Mayas” (Guatemala, 1977), are the only recent summaries available. In the introductory section Kelley reviews the general trends of the progress of decipherment and differs in important points from the earlier work by Thompson in presenting a detailed discussion of the work in phoneticism instigated by Knorosov. It should be noted that Kelley—early on and virtually alone among scholars on this side of the Atlantic—utilized the scholarship of Knorosov and expanded upon it with his own work. The book thus presents a balanced and cogent appraisal of the various arguments for and against phoneticism. The chapters that follow deal with general subject categories throughout part 1 of the book ranging from numbers to verbs and include summary treatments of calendrics, directions and colors, deities, animals, and plants. Part 2 of Kelley’s book deals with general problems in decipherment including the grammar of Maya writing, the structural analysis of text, and methods of decipherment. The illustrations that accompany Kelley’s text are for the most part well organized in relationship to that text, but the quality of the illustrations varies greatly, as if some glyph texts or pictures were added as afterthoughts. In the structural analysis of certain texts the format of the book, despite the use of numerous plates, has resulted in the presentation of glyphic clauses that are almost too small to read. This is particularly notable in figure 100 and is probably not the fault of Kelley, simply the mechanical reduction of glyph drawings that were probably not meant to be reduced. All in all, however, *Deciphering the Maya Script* stands as a summary work as close to the present state of the art as is now possible to procure.

To move from the general to the specific, one of the works that attacks particular problems is Joyce Marcus’ *Emblem and State in the Classic Maya Lowlands*, which employs hieroglyphic material to set up a hypothesis dealing with the territorial organization of the Classical Maya. Marcus’ approach draws upon the work by Berlin that first defined those signs he called emblem glyphs. What Marcus has done is to carry the consideration of these special glyphs a step farther and to tabulate the frequency of their occurrence at their own sites as well as others through specific periods of time in order to elicit what appears to be a changing pattern of political organization in the lowlands centered by Guatemala’s Peten areas. Basic to the consideration is the occurrence on Copan Stela A of four emblem glyphs attributable to the sites of Copan itself, Tikal, Calakmul (?), and Palenque, each associated on the monument with respective direction glyphs of east, west, south, and north. The monument, according to GMT correlation of Maya and Christian dates, corresponds to A.D. 731. Another monument figuring in Marcus’

consideration, Stela 10 at Seibal, datable to A.D. 889, contains the emblem glyphs of Seibal itself, Tikal, Calakmul (?), and Motul de San Jose (?).

From these two sets of glyphs Marcus postulates a four-part political division of the Maya lowlands at two points in time with a shift of capitals in two cases. From these beginnings she then makes a detailed study of site-to-site relationships based on the clusterings and/or isolated occurrences of emblem glyphs among the sites and progresses into a finer breakdown of the administrative network based on both the regional capitals and the networks of subsidiary sites in their immediate vicinities. Her considerations span the entire time period of the Classic inscriptions. The study is both interesting and innovative, though some might argue that its detailed conclusions regarding state organization and the hierarchical subdivisions are not totally conclusive. The work, however, does present this organizational hypothesis for further testing as other lines of evidence can be brought to bear on the matter. One of these lines of evidence will surely be a more detailed and accurate mapping of the southern Maya lowlands. Another potential problem in Marcus' case lies in the attribution of the emblem glyph now tentatively assigned to Calakmul. Since that site has been so thoroughly looted since its first reporting by Ruppert and Denison (1938), monuments bearing the serpent head emblem glyph may be found to be specific to another site rather than Calakmul and some evidence suggests El Peru as a candidate for the possessor of that emblem glyph. Despite these problems, which Marcus acknowledges, the study is quite detailed and provides an interesting possibility regarding an aspect of Maya culture that pure archaeology has so far only hinted at.

In *Lords of the Underworld*, Michael D. Coe continues the incredibly productive line of scholarship that began with the earlier *The Maya Scribe and His World* (1973) in which he presented the hypothesis that late Classic Maya polychrome cylinder vessels were painted and carved for the single purpose of being placed with the honored dead, and that the vases were not only funerary in function but in the iconographic content of the scenes that appear on them. In the earlier publication Coe presented convincing evidence that the hieroglyphic texts on the vast majority of the vases constituted a sort of "book of the dead"—a long standard text dealing with the underworld and the passage through it that could be excerpted in various degrees of completeness to accompany the mythical scenes. Coe's contribution was greatly reinforced by the apparent equation of some scenes from the late Classic period with specific incidents in the lives of the Hero Twins related in the sixteenth-century manuscript of Chichicastenango, the Popol Vuh or sacred book of the Quiché Maya. The present work is a thorough discussion of the iconography of a set of twenty vases that were recently exhibited at the

Princeton University Art Museum. Some of the pieces discussed had appeared earlier in *The Maya Scribe and His World* and here they are elaborated upon by the incorporation of thoughts that Coe has had since the publication of that volume. In *Lords of the Underworld* each vessel is illustrated by a normal black and white photograph accompanied by a fold-out color plate in which the particular vessel has been "rolled out" by means of a special apparatus developed by photographer Justin Kerr of New York City. This work forms an indispensable tool for anyone pursuing the study of Maya iconography and, by extension, the Maya glyphs. It is an elegant and expensive volume and I have no quarrel with the reproduction of the photographs except that two vases in particular (Numbers 3 and 6) seem to be excessively elongated in the roll-out photographs. The exaggerated horizontal dimension of vase Number 6 is particularly apparent if one compares Kerr's roll-out in this volume with his roll-out of the same vase that appeared in the National Geographic Society's publication, *The Mysterious Maya* (pp. 46–47). Despite these rather minor flaws, Coe's latest commentary on Maya vases places a wealth of iconographic data at our disposal—data that would otherwise be scattered and largely inaccessible.

Perhaps the high point of the 1970s in terms of ongoing research in Maya hieroglyphic writing has been the series of meetings at Palenque beginning in 1973 with the first *mesa redonda* and continuing every two years. It was through these gatherings, instigated and sponsored by Merle Greene Robertson and her husband Bob, that Maya glyphic research has found hospitality, a forum for scholarly intercommunication, and the opportunity for relatively rapid publication of their conclusions. The conferences have concentrated on the site of Palenque itself since it holds the largest cohesive body of well-preserved inscriptions and accompanying art among all the Classic Maya sites. It was at the first conference in 1973 that Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, working with Floyd Lounsbury and David Kelley, produced a dynastic list of the rulers of Palenque—an exhilarating breakthrough that set the stage for the high productivity that has taken place at Palenque since.

An example of the proceedings of the *mesa redonda* meetings is contained in the volume presently under review which deals with the second conference in December 1974, in which sixteen papers were presented by epigraphers, iconographers, archaeologists, astronomers, and linguists on problems related to the rulers of Palenque and, by extension, to the general mentality of the Classic period Maya. All of the volumes of the Palenque conferences including the present one are an absolute must as primary references to the unified approach to Maya hieroglyphic writing and its content. Part 2 of the proceedings of the third *mesa redonda* has just been published by the University of Texas Press, who has taken responsibility for all forthcoming volumes.

Thus the seven publications discussed above, despite their widely differing scopes and concentrations, reflect the ongoing progress of the decipherment of Maya writing. The major breakthroughs of the last decade, like all such episodes of progress, have been based on the work of the scholars who came earlier. While the focus of the individual publications discussed ranges from straight raw material to modern linguistic transcriptions, all the publications above constitute a prime sampling of the mainstream of progress in the 1970s. We all know that there is no single Rosetta Stone that will suddenly unlock the content of the inscriptions, but we can see true progress both in method and in the presentation of the raw data that we must work with. For all of us interested in ancient Maya writing these are perhaps the best of times.

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