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Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*

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Breaking the Maya Code. By Michael D. Coe. (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1992. 304 pp. Illustrations, maps, charts, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth.)

Most of the history of the Mayan rediscovery is well known. An American lawyer and travel writer, John Lloyd Stephens, and an English artist, Frederick Catherwood, rediscovered numerous sites of the great Mayan civilization in their daring explorations of Central America from 1839 to 1842. In addition to the detailed drawings of buildings, Catherwood's splendid illustrations depicted strange slabs or stelae covered with some kind of picture writing. Stephens believed that Mayan history was depicted by the picture writing on monuments such as Copán but wondered who would develop a method to decipher it.

Michael Coe's book supplies an answer to Stephens, but also asks an additional, more complicated question: why did decipherment take so long? The French scholar, Jean François Champollion (1790-1832), had provided the scholarly model. Using a code from Abbé Rémusat's study of Chinese, an appreciation of the three parallel texts on the Rosetta Stone, and his own expertise in Coptic, Champollion took about two years to arrive at the key for deciphering the Egyptian writing: the hieroglyphs could be both logograms and phonetic symbols. Why then did New World scholars cling to the belief that Mayan glyphs were only pictographs? Were the Maya intellectually *incapable* of "real writing?"

Early on, scholars unraveled some of the glyphs for gods, the number system, and the calendar. In 1862, the Abbé Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg provided the equivalent to the Rosetta Stone when he discovered Bishop Diego de Landa's *Relación de las cosas del Yucatán*, which explained the Mayan calendar system and the Mayan alphabet. Nevertheless, apparently whenever someone tried to apply Champollion's linguistic method to Mayan

texts, prominent scholars erected roadblocks. Sylvanus Morley's considerable reputation backed the belief that the Maya were the peaceful Greeks of Mesoamerica, whose inscriptions were primarily based on calendrics and astronomy.

The real black cloud of this drama, however, was Eric Thompson. With the force of his personality and his link to the Carnegie Institution of Washington, he impeded decipherment for several decades. Convinced that Mayan glyphs were logograms referring to the universal mysteries of time, Thompson treated scholars who differed with him as adversaries. Not a little sadness is attached to this story—one wonders about the flourishing and languishing of younger scholars who played peripheral roles.

The breakthrough came in the form of an article in 1952 by a thirty-year-old Russian, Yuri Valentinovich Knorosov, who recognized the significance of de Landa's "alphabet" and argued that Mayan glyphs, like the Old World scripts of Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Chinese, are logograms with both conceptual and phonetic values. When Tatiana Proskouriakoff's patient scholarship proved that the dates on stelae at Piedras Negras were the historical records of human beings and not the mythological annals of gods, the revolution took hold.

In the 1970s, after Thompson's death, the great period of decipherment began, boosted by the collaborative efforts initiated by the Mesa Redonda conferences in Palenque and the brilliant efforts of young scholars like Linda Schele, Floyd Lounsbury, Peter Matthews, David Kelley, and David Stuart. The Mayan texts slowly revealed a warlike, aggressive people, led by dynastic rivalries and ceremonies of blood.

Coe's book humanizes this engrossing piece of history with his mini-portraits of the major players, the villains and the heroes. It is an inside story of professional egos, quasi-racism, and short-sightedness, as well as brilliance and cooperation. Although not a major player himself in the decipherment drama, Coe was an "enabler, bringing advances in one area to the attention of people working in other areas;" at times even an impresario. He includes excellent explanations of all phases of the deciphering process. Incidentally, the fifth edition of his classic, *The Maya*, reflects the new understanding of Mayan glyphs and the breakthroughs in Mayanology.

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