

ELIZABETH BENSON

Interviewed March 18, 2005 at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Center in Washington DC

Art Historian Elizabeth Benson has had a long and distinguished career in Pre-Columbian studies. She has taught widely and organized numerous exhibitions and conferences on the Pre-Columbian cultures of Peru and Mesoamerica, including the Olmec and Maya. Her publications include *Birds and Beasts of Ancient Latin America* and *The Moche People*.



As Director of the Center for Pre-Columbian Studies at Dumbarton Oaks and Curator for the Pre-Columbian Collection at that institution, she hosted a series of conferences and “mini-conferences” on Maya epigraphy that contributed substantially to the Maya decipherment.

In this interview she recalls the 1973 First Mesa Redonda de Palenque and the influential Miniconference on Maya Epigraphy that she hosted at Dumbarton Oaks the following spring.

- [**Her work at Dumbarton Oaks; Thompson, Proskouriakoff, Berlin and Lounsbury**](#)
- [**The 1973 Mesa Redonda de Palenque**](#)
- [**The 1974 Dumbarton Oaks Miniconference and its aftermath**](#)
- [**The past and future of the decipherment**](#)

Interview transcript

Her work at Dumbarton Oaks; Thompson, Proskouriakoff, Berlin and Lounsbury

Q: Let's go back to sort of the beginning of Dumbarton Oaks, this would be in the early sixties, and you'd already worked with the Bliss Collection somewhat before in another museum, and had the opportunity to do this here, and that began your meeting -- I guess that's where you began meeting new people in this field.

Benson: That's right. I'd worked with the Bliss collection, a collection that's now here, when it was at the National Gallery on loan. Where it was some fifteen years, I think, on exhibition, and that was when I first got interested in these things and began talking to people in the field and thinking about the objects. And then I went to New York for a while, and I got a phone call one day from the director of Dumbarton Oaks asking if I would come and set up the collection. I said yes, and I came temporarily but I decided that this was a pretty nice place and a very good field to be working in, so I stayed for quite a long time.

The excitement with the hieroglyphs began -- I was thinking this morning about it – it was about 50 years ago that things began to happen in the field of decipherment with Heinrich Berlin's paper on the-- what we call the emblem glyphs that are associated with different cities, with the lineage of that city. Then Tatiana Proskouriakoff wrote papers. She looked at the inscriptions on stone monuments in Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan, and could read the dates (which of course is one of the things that everybody could read for quite a long time) and then a name glyph next to a date, and she ascertained that these were rulers and that these were their reigns and things that had happened in their reigns. And until that time these inscriptions were thought to be mostly kind of monuments to time and rather abstract religious texts. What Berlin and Proskouriakoff prove is that they were historical texts with dates in them and people.

So that had already happened and other things were happening. Mike Coe, for example, in the fall of '73 did an exhibition at the Grolier Club in New York of Maya vases. He looked at the text in the inscriptions on the Maya vases which other people had said "oh these are decorative, these are just sort of filling in spaces" and Mike realized that there

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

Transcript of filmed interview

Complete interview transcripts at www.nightfirefilms.org

was a pattern in these inscriptions, and that the ones around the rim -- they didn't always have all of the glyphs in the sequence but they had the same glyphs out of that or some out of that sequence -- and they were in the same order, and he called this the primary standard sequence. So that was one beginning and then that December, Merle Greene Robertson --

Q: Before we get to the events of the 70's, in the course of your work here in the 60's, I imagine you met some of the figures in Maya studies, I'd like to just ask you about a few people and sort of give me your impression of them, what they were like as people and what you feel their contribution was. Thompson -- I believe you met Thompson?

Benson: I met Thompson but I didn't really know him. I never seriously talked to him. I met him at the Congress of Americanists in Mexico City, that was probably in 1970. It was not long before he died and about the time that all these other things were happening, but I have no real impression of him.

Q: What do you feel about his contribution to the field? Mike in his book sort of portrays him as a very brilliant and deeply learned man who set the decipherment back 50 years.

Benson: Thompson's contributions I think were tremendous, in the book "On Maya [Hieroglyphic] Writing" he says a tremendous, a lot of lore and background for the translations, for what the language came out of. And then of course he also did the dictionary of Maya hieroglyphs, which is -- I think people are still using Thompson numbers to identify glyphs. The glyphs are not exactly considered in the same way as they were when Thompson did that, but it was a tremendously useful effort. But I think that he was getting older when all of these things started happening and he just wasn't ready to accept Knorosov's work on being able actually to read these syllabically. He had a hard time with that.

Q: He did accept Tania's work overnight...

Benson: Yes, well, as -- I recall that, but it did take him overnight; he didn't accept it the minute she first told him. I think he was slow to realize what was going, but I think that his earlier, younger contributions were extremely important and did help the study along; he just didn't get in on that last surge that really got the thing going at a tremendous pace.

Q: Tell me about Tania Proskouriakoff .

Benson: I knew her somewhat better, yes. She was a rather, I don't want to say shy but a reserved person, but on the other hand, very firm in what she thought was right and what she could do. She was a very impressive person. She was a Russian aristocrat and she

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

Transcript of filmed interview

Complete interview transcripts at www.nightfirefilms.org

had a certain style and certain manner but she was an impressive person and she certainly made a real breakthrough. She started out of course as a project artist and her art drawings are very valuable, too. They've been published of the buildings at many Maya sites. She had an interesting career with no particular academic background, I don't think, but a very fine mind and talent.

Q: Heinrich Berlin?

Benson: Heinrich Berlin I knew only from the letter that he wrote to me at the time of the mini-conference.

Q: Ok, well, then let's save that. The first mini-conference you had here was in '71 wasn't it, with Proskouriakoff and others?

Benson: That conference in 1971 was not a mini-conference. It was one of our regular conference series which we started having I think in '68, '67. But it was our annual conference and that was on Mesoamerican writing systems, so we had not only Maya but also Mixtec, Aztec, the codices, the folding books from other cultures, as well as the Maya. And Tania Proskouriakoff gave a very good paper then, Floyd Lounsbury gave an excellent paper -- but it was not an entirely Maya meeting, but it was a beginning for us in that field.

Q: Is that when you first met Floyd [Lounsbury]? When did you first get to know Floyd? Tell me about Floyd and his work here.

Benson: Yes I think I met Floyd first at the time of the-- perhaps I met him once in New Haven briefly-- but I got to know him at the time of that '71 writing systems conference. In 1973 he was a fellow, a senior fellow here and he was also here again at another time. He and Linda were here the same year, several years later and that was a rich and interesting time. I think a lot of things came out of that, but Floyd -- his office was just outside of mine and sometimes late in the day I would stay on after five if I was working on something -- and Floyd might come to my door, which was always open, and say "I've been thinking about something". And he would then expound the most beautiful articulate argument for the reading of a glyph, or for a structure in the language... and he really was, in a very quiet understated way, he was certainly one of the most brilliant people I've ever known, really extraordinary mind. He started out, I think, as a mathematician, and he became a linguist along with the study of ethnography. And he was wonderfully rich, but he was always very quiet about it. And he didn't come on like a genius, but rather like a quiet country farmer. But what came out of his head was extraordinary.

The 1973 Mesa Redonda de Palenque

Q: Let's talk about the first Mesa Redonda. Floyd and you went down together?

Benson: Floyd and I went down [to Palenque] together. Floyd had been working -- he had not had a long background of working with Maya writing -- but he had been working on the codices, on the folding screen books. And when he went to the Mesa Redonda, the Round Table at Palenque, he thought, I think, that he should write something about an object. He had prepared a paper on a carved vase, which had inscriptions on it. And I think he actually gave that paper, but that was not what appeared in the publication because he of course got involved with Linda Schele and Peter Mathews and what they were doing there. And what was exciting was that these three people who hadn't known each other before -- suddenly everything clicked, and the most extraordinary things came out of it. That was the first time that I had met Linda and Peter for that matter, but -- so Floyd Lounsbury's paper that was published in the Mesa Redonda publication was not on his vase, but a much more rich and interesting one on the Palenque sarcophagus and the inscriptions on the tomb of the ruler Pakal.

Q: What was the atmosphere at the Primera Mesa Redonda? What was it like, what went on?

Benson: It was quite informal...a lot of it went on...we had session in a champa. A champa is an open structure kind of like a porch, standing all by itself, with a thatched roof. I can't remember quite what we did with showing slides in the champa. Certainly a lot of the work in the sessions were in Merle's house. Merle then had a house in Palenque; she did for some years. But one distraction we had from the champa was that there were some monkeys who were playing in the tree above it, and so we had a little extra sound along with the paper sound. But there were, I can't remember exactly how many people - you can find that from the publication - but it was quite a small group and I would think maybe twenty or so people. So it was casual with a lot of conversation and a certain respect for people giving papers. But also when you wanted to say something you said it. But it was very exciting what Peter and Linda came up with.

Q: That was on the last day of the conference as I hear tell, on the last day, a lot of people went off and did different things. They went and holed themselves up in Merle's kitchen....?

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

Transcript of filmed interview

Complete interview transcripts at www.nightfirefilms.org

Benson: That sounds right. I don't remember exactly how that happened. I remember that it was a wonderful moment of triumph that everybody shared in. They had worked on some large sheets of paper and got the list together and they held those up for us and everybody went off in great excitement.

The 1974 Dumbarton Oaks Miniconference and its aftermath

The results were so exciting that it was a real breakthrough time. Then the spring following that, I realized that I was going to have some money left in my funds for that fiscal year and that before the first of July I could have a small conference. My thought was to try to get to those people together, the three people who'd been involved in this breakthrough, with as many as possible of the other people who had worked on, and published on, Palenque inscriptions. And I invited everybody I could think of, including Heinrich Berlin who said that he was too old to come, -- and I'm not sure I remember exactly, but his phrase was "I no longer play with those things with which I used to toy" or something like that, and he certainly did some useful play in his day. But the other people were Dave Kelly at the University of Calgary whose student, Peter Mathews was - -- and Dave had published on the Palenque inscriptions -- and Tatiana Proskouriakoff, and Mike Coe, and Joyce Marcus may have been here -- she was then a student of Tatiana's -- and that I think was about it.

Q: <inaudible>

Benson: Yes, George Kubler was there, and Floyd, yes. But I invited all these people, and I thought they could sit around and talk to each other and discuss things. I very stupidly did not structure the meeting at all. I should have had the Palenque people make some kind of presentations or something, but because they did not just sit around and talk usefully, I got very depressed that day over this meeting. Nobody was quite saying the right things or having the right conversations. At this end of the table Linda Schele was sitting on that side and Tatiana was sitting on this side. They were facing each other, and the physical contrast between these two women of course was extraordinary. Linda was big and casually dressed and kind of very effusive and enthusiastic, and Tatiana was small and slender and reserved and Tatiana didn't know what to make of this creature who was sitting across the table from her. She'd never encountered her before and didn't know what she had done, and didn't quite believe or didn't believe it, what she was saying...and Linda was trying -- was on her very best behavior because she wanted to get along with Tania and she wanted this to be right and it just -- the chemistry was all wrong and didn't go at all.

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

Transcript of filmed interview

Complete interview transcripts at www.nightfirefilms.org

So that night we went to the apartment that Floyd Lounsbury and his wife had up the street for drinks, and I took Floyd aside and said you've got to help me structure this tomorrow morning 'cause this has been a terrible day. So we had a little more structure in the morning, and then people began to go home. The people started leaving in the late morning and catching planes and there were then just Linda and Peter and Floyd and Merle Greene Robertson and Dave Kelly, who was new to the group, who were sitting... They were kind of talking two by two, or they were talking at least, and -- but nothing very much was happening... and at a certain moment, suddenly as I remember, Linda and Peter and Dave I think were down on the floor around a copy of Maudslay, of the drawings and photographs that he did around the beginning of the-- about 100 years ago-- looking at his photographs and drawings, and Floyd was in-- I think Floyd was rather frail and he was probably in a chair, but he was part of this circle. And they suddenly got a new glyph, and they were quite excited about this. And what interested and excited me was that each one of them saw or knew something different, and so they could prove in four or five different kinds of ways what their reading was. But they all agreed on it, and I thought, "This is why I had this meeting. This is my team". And so I got them together several other times and then they started getting themselves together and that went on for quite a while. At one of those meetings, the later ones --

Q: What do you think was the chemistry in that group; did each of them bring different things to that, when you brought those people together?

Benson: Jane Kelly, Dave's wife said to me once, "you've got to explain how these people work together like this" and I said I can't really explain it except that they are absolutely open with each other. Nobody's holding back. Nobody's playing any kind of ego games. They are absolutely honest and straight out and saying everything they think. And the other thing is that they all had quite different kinds of backgrounds and quite different kinds of minds in a way, so that this fact, that they did see different kinds of things in what they knew about the glyph...they all knew something different about it or they saw it in different kinds of ways. And when they got all that together it was wonderful and it worked and that was what made the chemistry.

Q: Let's talk a little bit more--I think you were talking about the issue of what each of the people in this group brought to the chemistry of that-- more specifically you know, what do you think, each of them, what were their strengths? Just in terms of the balance of that group, in terms of knowledge and in terms of style and personality...what did each of them bring to the table?

Benson: Linda of course had started out as an artist and she brought, I think, this visual ability to look at things in that rather special and very keen way that artists have. In

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

Transcript of filmed interview

Complete interview transcripts at www.nightfirefilms.org

addition to that she had a very bright mind and a lot of energy and curiosity. Peter had come from Australia to Calgary, had gotten interested in glyphs, and simply had been sitting up there working-- well of course Dave was working with him-- but he has the kind of mind that works with that kind of thing very well. I don't know where he might've picked up something in his background for that, but he also has a wonderfully sharp mind and I think started working with these when he was very young and so he had all of that energy of youth that's well applied to the study of glyphs. Floyd--I've talked about it a little bit but he, I think, has one of the most extraordinary minds I've ever seen. He started out with mathematics, which is a good firm discipline for this kind of work. He also had studied and observed widely in ethnographic fields and the languages that went with these various places that he had studied. And Dave has a mind, Dave Kelly, also that he was interested not just in the writing but in the astronomy and the astrology that went with these things because of course, for these ancient people, astronomy and astrology were the same thing. They were the same study and played the same kind of part in their lives. And Dave was interested in that kind of thing. He was interested in far eastern religions and -- all of these people had broad interests and broad minds. And I think that was one of the things that was good and special about them. But each had a somewhat different slant and viewpoint.

Q: Dave, when I talked him, he told me that he came to Mesoamerican stuff from genealogy, just being interested in the genealogy of others-- and then he got into Maya genealogy.

Benson: That's right. He was interested in genealogy, Dave Kelly was. But he was interested in - he still is interested in - so many things, that it's a very broad kind of mind and I guess when you start working seriously with genealogy, it does take you in all kinds of directions.

Q: You started to say as time went on you actually held a few more conferences with them and they continued to work on their own. Can you talk about that?

Benson: They did so well that first time when they got excited about this and the things they were doing that evening, I thought, "now this is why I had this meeting. Something good did come out of it and this is my team." And so I got them together several more times out here. I think three more times here probably. Once I remember Dave Kelly was in England and he flew in for this mini-meeting on the weekend, and he came in a little bit late. And the others were here and they had just worked out a new glyph. And when Dave walked in, Linda said, "Hey Dave. We've just got a new glyph. We all agreed that this is such-and-such". I don't remember now what it was. And Dave taking off his coat said, "I want to know why each one of you accepts that". And this is the way they

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

Transcript of filmed interview

Complete interview transcripts at www.nightfirefilms.org

worked. Each one had to prove his or her point. And it was very telling I think that he came in and asked that, and they did, and he agreed. But this went on, as I say, several times and then I occasionally would get a postcard from Dave Kelly's summer place in New Hampshire or somewhere with five people having written some kind of note or glyphs on it and they had gotten themselves together for another meeting. And they did this for some years.

Q: It continued more or less right up to Floyd's death and Linda's death.

Benson: I think it did, yes.

Q: Peter and Linda kept working right up to Linda's death.

Benson: Yes.

Q: They didn't always get together, but the chemistry always was the same.

Benson: Yes. I think that they ultimately did not actually have to get together. They could do this on the computer or by writing or whatever they were into at the time, because they were so-- when you work that closely with people of course, on this kind of thing, you begin to know how the other person is going to think and how the other person will react to your latest idea. And so they didn't always need the meetings, but I think they did it when they could because it was a good bull session.

Q: Did you attend any of the Austin meetings?

Benson: I rarely managed to get to the Austin meetings. I like the Austin meetings. I would like to have gone this year except I had to be in Mexico that weekend. But the Austin meetings have been very important, I think, and a very good thing for Maya studies. A lot of interest has come out of the Austin meetings and I think there's a great deal in general of popular interest in this mysterious Maya hieroglyph writing. And of course, the more stimulation there is and the more interest there, I think this does help the field. And there are some people who have been real amateurs who have contributed. Justin Kerr is an example I think of somebody who was - I mean he's a photographer, but he's very good with Maya glyphs. And people, if they had that kind of mind, they can work on them and contribute something without any great background. Not many, but some.

Q: Just talk about Linda and her overall contribution and impact. A lot of it was pushing other people forward and moving other people and sort of being able to encompass a lot

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

Transcript of filmed interview

Complete interview transcripts at www.nightfirefilms.org

of different things and getting them together, and there was also a double-sided thing to it. David Stuart once said to me she was a bulldozer. She cut paths and sometimes that meant that she rolled over people's toes, and sort of gave a priority to getting things out, that she ruffled a lot of feathers along the way. Have you seen that aspect of her?

Benson: Yes Linda was terribly enthusiastic and energetic about this and I think in a way this caused her greatest creations and her greatest contributions. It also caused some problems. She did sometimes ride rather rough shod or not quite play the game in the most elegant way. But her enthusiasm and her knowledge really and her ability to inspire other people to get interested in these things and to stimulate other people was a major contribution. She certainly made prolific contributions herself. Sometimes the things that she was enthusiastic about turned out to be not right. But I like it when people want to get the ideas out whether they're right or not. If you hold back until you're absolutely certain of everything, it isn't always as stimulating as it is when you just, you know, "I've got this idea. Let me put it out in the public and see if it flies". And I think Linda did do a certain amount of that and I think it was a good thing. And she inspired a lot of students and other people in the field, and she inspired work by sometimes, I think, from people who didn't agree with her. So they had to prove their point, or try to. And that's good too. It's good to have this kind of work going on in two different and contradictory ways because you're bound to come out with something one way or the other and that's a good process.

Q: Going back to the first meeting here, at the first mini-conference, there was this real difference in style between some of the older or more established people and these upstarts from the Palenque group. Tania and Berlin and so forth had really been loners, and this collaborative method was not their way. And also I think the Palenque group -- Peter Matthews was talking about this the other day-- because they sort of proceeded by saying "Well, let's take for granted what Tania's done and what Knorosov has done. Let's take this as granted and move on from there." And then Tania, that day here, sort of was questioning everything. He [Peter] said that at one point during that two-day thing she said, "Well how do you know this is about history?" From Tania? You know, "How do you know this is about history?" She's the one that proved that it was! Did you see that in sort of Kubler and Tania having been in this other camp and having a different style but also a different way of operating?

Benson: There are lots of different ways of operating. Some people do work better alone and individually, and other people work better in groups. When Heinrich Berlin and Tania Proskouriakoff were doing their work, there weren't that many people interested in glyphs and they more or less had to work alone. And they were people who could and

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

Transcript of filmed interview

Complete interview transcripts at www.nightfirefilms.org

did. Now there are so many people who are interested in glyphs and it's a different kind of world to work in I think for one thing, in addition to the different kinds of personalities. I think there are still some people who don't quite accept what's been done. But I think that most of it is now pretty hard to deny. I don't think that really good cases can be made against most of what's been done. I think there will always be some things probably that will be unknown or arguable. But the basic work I think is there and is very strong. My feeling is that most of the people who disagree don't know quite as much about glyphs and linguistics as the people who are - I maybe wrong about that, but that's my impression.

Q: Going back to that first mini-conference, did you sort of see it as two camps? Sort of the Palenque camp trying to convince these other folks that weren't there and the others not being able to accept it?

Benson: Yeah I think that at that first mini-conference, the work that had been done at the Palenque roundtable had not yet been published and the people who were invited didn't really know quite what was going on. And I think that the people who were at Palenque did make statements about what they had discovered and they did present the Palenque king list. But I think it came as such fresh material to some of the old guard, that they didn't initially quite accept this because it was something new. I mean Tania Proskouriakoff was initially very baffled by this. I think later she did accept much certainly of what they had done. But I think it was too much fresh news or too fresh a kind of news at that meeting to suddenly spring on people who had not been thinking in the ways that the Palenque people were thinking.

Q: Moving on from that time, I mentioned the dispute over Pakal began. And later as the epigraphy sort of began to come out in the public eye, that had not yet really been, you know, in the 80s, as proved as it is now 15 years, 20 years later, there was a kind of rift between archaeologists who as you say, knew less about the hieroglyphs, were less willing to accept this. There was a real -- I don't know if it was jealousy or just distrust, or just they didn't have the data and the knowledge to accept this. This seemed like something that went on for 10, 15, 20 years and has now kind of resolved itself as people -- now all the projects have epigraphers. What was your take on that period?

Benson: As for Pakal's age, I think that has to be accepted from the dates in the inscriptions. That's pretty clear and pretty basic. At the time of Ruz Lhuillier's excavations, Arturo Romano was the physical anthropologist or the person who examined the bones on that day who had said that he was about 40. We talked to him about this later at a meeting. He came to a meeting at Princeton, and he accepted the 80 because he said at the time that he had done that, all you could really tell about human

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

Transcript of filmed interview

Complete interview transcripts at www.nightfirefilms.org

remains was whether it was an adult or a child, male or a female, and that you could not be that precise about age. If it was someone over 21 or whatever the cut off date was, that was it. And so he accepted it. The man who had originally given this age of 40 I think, he accepted the 80 date. He said, yes. I mean he was an adult and we couldn't be that refined at that time.

Q: Were you encountering the stresses and strains between epigraphers and archaeologists of the 80s?

Benson: Personally I wasn't because I wasn't that involved. I learned initially what my hieroglyphs people knew when I first started looking at these things and I knew all the day names and the months and the time period glyphs etc. But when they started getting serious about the glyphs I thought, I do not have that kind of mind and I do not work with those things anymore. But certainly I would hear certain remarks about this. But in general I think that the work that came out of the first Palenque roundtable and the mini-conference is pretty solid and I think now it's basically pretty much accepted, and a lot has been built on that.

The past and future of the decipherment

Q: Just moving sort of back for an overview, why do you think the Maya decipherment took so long, given Egyptian was deciphered fairly quickly, and this story stretched out over a couple of hundred years? Do you think the script was just so much more complex, or just the beliefs about who the Maya were, the possibilities of speaking the language....

Benson: The 19th century was a time of, for one thing, of romantic interests in other peoples, and I think there was an appeal about the glamour and exoticness of other civilizations which didn't always lead to scholarship in the field. It did in some cases, and there was some very good 19th century scholarship. But there wasn't much. There were the inscriptions, but it was hard to get hold of these. The Landa manuscript was not published in English until Tozzer published it in 1941. I think there was an earlier European publication. But these things came - the sources came relatively late. Also I think you needed the invention of photography for one thing to make a collection of monuments to work with. So I think that there were more sources in the 20th century and more disciplined interest perhaps. When you look at some of the early drawings, some of them were-- Catherwood was excellent but some of the early people drawing Maya monuments you don't recognize Maya style at all, and the glyphs are just any little

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

Transcript of filmed interview

Complete interview transcripts at www.nightfirefilms.org

hatchings they could put together. So I think it was a matter of solely having a larger body of knowledge of things to work with and a more disciplined kind of interest in them. And once this got going, it took off. It did take a long time for it to take off. And I'm not quite sure why that was, but it had its moment and it was somewhere around the 1950s when it really began. And then of course I think the momentum of everything in the world is faster now so the momentum of Maya studies is also faster than it was in the past.

Q: What do you think is the future of the decipherment and the study of Maya writing? What do you think will be going on in 20 years?

Benson: I suppose that in 20 years the basic things will be pretty much accepted. There may always be questions of knowing what the ritual was that this is the glyph for. We'll never know quite everything because we won't simply have the context to know what went on in the past. And I suppose like other fields, one will simply find smaller and smaller subjects to deal with once you've got the whole thing pretty well worked out. The wonderful thing of the pre-Columbian field in general now is that it's still so new and open and there's still so much to do. And this is still part of it. Whereas with Renaissance art, it's kind of hard to find a new subject with it. The new world is full of new subjects.

There is always new material and there are always surprises. And something else I think that will happen now that the Maya thing is more or less worked out, is the proto-Maya inscriptions. The Olmec inter-Maya gradation - this came up at the meeting in Mexico City and people were talking about Olmec writing. And I sat there realizing and then somebody else brought this up, these are all post-Olmec things they're showing but they're between Olmec and Maya. And so that's a field that is still pretty open.

Q: Are you talking about the EpiOlmec script?

Benson: Yes.

Q: -- and the La Mojarra Stela, and --

Benson: Yes. Yes. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Q: You've spent a lot of time on Olmec iconography and the Olmec communicated a lot with symbols. What do you see is the dividing line between communication with complex symbol systems and communication with true writing? And what is your take on that shift in Mesoamerica from --we have an object here where, you know, on one side you have this Olmec carving; on the other side you have Maya writing, and there's not much in between? By the time you see an object with Maya writing on it, it's already a

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

Transcript of filmed interview

Complete interview transcripts at www.nightfirefilms.org

pretty sophisticated system. What do you see as having gone on there? Where do you see the dividing line?

Benson: There's probably a lot that we still don't know about between Olmec and Maya writing, but in the classic Olmec, in the middle formative Olmec, there are a lot of elements that are almost glyphs, that are almost writing. The little cleft head element. The thing that looks like -- or they're sometimes on celts or jade knives. They're drawn on them but they're sometimes celt-shaped themselves and they will put four of them, on sort of the four world directions around a head of a supernatural being. The images that are carved on the little Dumbarton Oaks figure-- these are almost writing. They're symbols for something and they're very close to writing. The heads, which are some kind of supernatural heads, are generally the same in form. They're a glyph size and shape but they're all slightly different. They have their own characteristics. I think this is the beginning of writing. It isn't quite writing yet but it's working in that direction. And it's not a very big jump to get to some fairly simple writing system to take those elements that they clearly are using. But we haven't yet seen the bridge between those and the actual glyphs, which appear earlier, which are still something to work on. But some day I think somebody's going to come up with an object that sort of shows this transition.

Q: Well, thank you.