

MICHAEL D. COE

Interviewed April 6 and 7, 2005 at his home in New Haven, Connecticut



In the 1950s archaeologist [Michael Coe](#) was one of the pioneering investigators of the Olmec Civilization. He later made major contributions to Maya epigraphy and iconography. In more recent years he has studied the Khmer civilization of Cambodia. He is the Charles J. MacCurdy Professor of Anthropology,

Emeritus at Yale University, and Curator Emeritus of the Anthropology collection of Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History. He is the author of *Breaking the Maya Code* and numerous other books including *The Maya Scribe and His World*, *The Maya* and *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*.

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Interview Transcript

The nature of writing systems

Q: Michael, could you talk a bit about the nature of writing systems and their relationship to spoken language, and the misconceptions that people had about that -- about what we know about how writing systems actually relate to the spoken language?

Michael Coe: For centuries, people had the wrong idea about writing systems, unusual or foreign writing systems or exotic writing systems, such as Egyptian or Chinese -- that the writing system had no real relationship to the Egyptian language -- whatever it was, they weren't too sure -- or to Chinese, which they did know. They got the idea among European intellectuals in the 17th and 18th Century that these writing systems were purely ideological, that is that they expressed ideas, straight from the soul, straight from the heart, straight from the brain, rather than passing through the medium of language. The Egyptians, in particular, fascinated them. They couldn't read all these inscriptions on obelisks that were placed around Rome, for instance. They'd love to have been able to. But a 17th Century scholar, an amazing man named Athanasius Kircher, an unusual Jesuit scholar or polymath, actually, thought that he could read them, and that they -- each sign, separately, meant one idea. So this was a wonderful writing system, that the kind of Neoplatonic ideas that they had from the Greek philosophers, this was the best kind of writing system, that they didn't have to worry about language or a language. It was just straight from the brain. When Chinese came into the consideration of these Europeans, they began to get the same idea about Chinese. It wasn't until Jesuits actually went to

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China and tried to convert the Chinese court that they learned that this writing system really was closely connected with language. There isn't any writing system, real writing system in the world, that is not closely tied to language, and a particular language. Perhaps you could talk about the road sign systems that we have or- that tell you, for instance, "don't park here", and whatnot- that could be looked at without any language. But they are not really writing systems. Writing systems express a particular language- its grammar, its syntax, its vocabulary, its phonetics. And it was that discovery that enabled the great decipherments to be made, such as the decipherment of Egyptian.

Q: Maybe go back to the Greeks even, because didn't the Greeks have this notion that Egyptian expressed pure ideas? Talk about the romance of that, the notion that it's, I suppose, a key to the mysteries, that these languages would be the source of wisdom.

Michael Coe: The Greeks had the idea that these symbols, which they saw on the monuments of Egypt- and they knew the Egyptian civilization. They were in contact with it. They knew Egyptian priests. Somehow or another, Greek philosophers, later than Plato, got the idea that this writing system was something special, that it expressed the philosophy and religion of these people directly. And everything they wrote about that writing system, unfortunately, was wrong. The only one who got it right was Herodotus, who was often considered the father of history- we now consider him the father of anthropology. Herodotus had one thing right in that it was read from, generally, from right to left. We do know that that's true. That's the only thing the Greeks got straight about this. And during the Renaissance in Europe, when all of these Greek writings were rediscovered and re-evaluated, they took over the Greek notions about that writing system. And it's led to all kinds of misconceptions that had to do with other even more exotic writing systems that were discovered later, such as, most particularly the Maya.

Q: When Athanasius Kircher was confronted with this obelisk that went up in the Piazza Minerva, how did he make sense of it? What did he do with it?

Michael Coe: Athanasius Kircher lived in Rome, being a member of the Jesuit hierarchy there, and he was a really good scholar. He did all kinds of interesting things. He had his own museum, his own collection. And in the Piazza Minerva is an obelisk, the smallest of all Roman obelisks in Rome, that sits on top of an elephant. And his notion was that this obelisk represented wisdom sitting on strength, strength being this lovely little elephant who was actually designed by the great sculptor, Bernini. It's a wonderful monument. And Kircher actually published a translation of this that is absolute, complete gobbledygook. There isn't one thing that is right about it, because he was stuck in this Neo-platonic idea that these things were all just pure symbols expressing thoughts-

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that it was an ideographic system. And there's no such thing as ideographic writing, per se, purely. He didn't realize that this thing was in the Egyptian language and now can be read in the Egyptian language. It's got nothing to do with poor old Kircher's translation. But for a couple of centuries, everybody accepted, or at least one century, people accepted Kircher's interpretation, until, of course, the great discoveries of Champollion and other specialists showed that this thing is actually in the Egyptian language.

Q: Could you talk a little about the kinds of writing systems that do exist, and whether any of them are pure. If you could give us some examples of the different kinds of writing systems. And – if an epigrapher was coming in and looking at an unknown writing system, how would he get an idea of what kind of writing system he's dealing with?

Michael Coe: There are several kinds of writing systems in the world. They can be classified- all the writing systems, hundreds of them that have probably been developed, can be pretty well classified into basically three groups. One of these is, of course, our own writing system, which is alphabetic, in which individual consonants and vowels are expressed- each one of these is individually expressed by one particular symbol. For instance, you have a consonant, such as a "b", or a "c", or a "d", in our system, and our vowels, such as a,e,i,o,u all have their own symbol, separately. It's fairly phonetic. Our writing system isn't completely- it's quite a complicated one. But, in effect, it is an alphabetic system. And for a long time, people thought, oh, well, basically, that's a real writing system, there aren't any other kinds of writing systems. And if it isn't alphabetic and phonetic, then it's not a real writing system. However, there are syllabic systems in which the- each symbol stands not for an individual consonant or a vowel- except in the cases of the pure vowels, like a,e,i,o and u- but rather a consonant followed by a vowel. A good example of this is in Japanese. Japanese can be written completely as a bunch of syllables. And this is, of course, one of the best known examples of a syllabary. So that's a second kind of writing system. And when people discovered that the Japanese existed and started to deal with them, they realized how that system worked. Other syllabaries have been developed by other peoples. The Ancient Greeks did this, in what we call the Late Bronze Age. The Linear B system, most famously cracked by Michael Ventris, is completely syllabic.

The third kind of writing system is what we would call logosyllabic- that is, it's mixed logographic and phonetic. By logographic, we mean that- a logographic expresses a whole word. For instance, if you wanted to write the word elephant logographically, you would probably draw an elephant. That would be the most logical thing you could do. But logographs never stand by themselves alone in these systems. They usually have

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some clues to indicate how it is pronounced, in a particular language. And the general way, in logographic systems, to do this is to have a syllabary, alongside it, so that you take those syllabic signs and you kind of tack them on or put them around or even within the logograph- your kind of elephant symbol, let's say, to say that this thing begins with the sound 'eh', for instance, or ends with a "t" sound. You would do that, and we call those things phonetic complements. They're to help you to read the logographs. Now that is a very ancient and very common kind of system, wherever writing has been developed. That's what Chinese is, that's what the ancient cuneiform system that the peoples of Ancient Mesopotamia, the former Iraq, how they wrote, the earliest writing in the world. And it's the way the Maya wrote. We know this for sure now, that it's a logosyllabic mixed system. So you've got the three kinds of systems- the logosyllabic, pure syllabic and the alphabetic system, which is the one that we have, which we inherited from the Greeks.

Q: You're an epigrapher, you're finding an unknown writing system, how do you begin to get a notion of what you're dealing with?

Michael Coe: Let's say you're an epigrapher. You have come across, in the jungle or in the desert, ancient monuments with writing on them that nobody has ever seen before, this is the first time. Or somebody has dug these up hundreds of years ago but nobody's deciphered them. How do you go about knowing what- which one of the three systems it's in? The first thing you do is to see how many signs are in use. If, for instance, you have a system, or monuments, on which you have never discovered, let's say, more than 30 signs or 40 signs, or perhaps 26, you're probably dealing with an alphabet- almost certainly you're dealing with an alphabet. You'd be pretty confident that this was an alphabetic system of signs that only expressed individual consonants and individual vowels. This is what we have. If you go into Ancient Rome, this is exactly what you'd find, walking through the forum. You would probably never find more than 26 or so signs being used on Roman monuments.

But let's just say that you were in the Middle East in Mesopotamia or in the mainland of Greece and you came across an archive on clay tablets that had more than 40, but say less than 100 or 120 signs on it. You would probably be right in thinking that that was a syllabary, because most of the syllabaries of the world that have been identified, syllabic writing, such as the Linear B or the Japanese Kanji system and whatnot, have a signary, that is, a number of signs that's about in that category.

Let's say that you have now a site, of in the jungles, with a whole lot of inscribed stones and whatnot on them, and they've got- when you tot up all the number of signs that you actually find on those monuments, it comes to more than 300, 400, 500, maybe even 800

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or a thousand signs, you're almost certainly dealing with a logosyllabic system, because that's what logosyllabic systems are like. There are many, many, many, many signs of- it's very complex, and there are many ways of often of writing the same word. So you find that many signs. In the case of Maya, I will say right away that we have in the order of about 800 signs, in total, that have been identified, of which only a few hundred were in general use at any one time. But right away, we would know that if you found an unknown system like that, on Mars, let's say, you would be pretty well advised to think of it as a logosyllabic system.

Q: Let's talk about a couple of logograms. You give me an example.

Michael Coe: The scribes who use these logographic systems or logosyllabic systems or logophonetic systems, as you can call them, were faced with a real problem that they had to solve. If you wrote down, as some of these old people like Kircher thought, only meaning signs, that is logographs, whole words there, you are faced with a problem in that you're not ever quite sure whether that picture indicates exactly one meaning, or you don't know what the meaning always is. The people who are reading this system, that is the people to whom you are sending this message, would get confused. So, to take this confusion out, this is why phonetic signs have to be added, which are usually syllabic signs in logophonetic systems, but not always. Chinese is heavily logographic. This system, which used to be thought, by European scholars, to be purely idiographic, that these were only, of course, meaning signs. This is the kind of thing you get when they're trying to explain the Chinese writing system, in Chinese restaurants, on the table place settings, which -- completely misunderstanding the system. 95% of all Chinese characters combine a meaning sign, what we consider to be a logogram or logograph, with a phonetic sign, which gives you the sound of that thing. So, Chinese gets along fine using only that. That is, you can call them hieroglyphs if you want, or Chinese characters, which have on one side of them or on top of them, the meaning or general class of objects to which this particular thing belongs- like is it something connected with water, is it something connected with fire, is it something connected with wood, something connected with vegetable life? And on the other side you have a phonetic sign, which gives you the general sound of it. Now, of course, the sound shifts have taken place over the centuries in China, so they don't always quite match up. But they match up pretty well. And that's what 95% of these compound signs are in Chinese.

Now, the problem with epigraphy, in the Maya area, has always been that nobody had a comparative approach, for a long, long time, with a few notable exceptions. One of these people was the 19th Century French scholar, Leon del Rosny, who read Chinese and read many Oriental languages, knew a lot of writing systems. In general, Mayanists, in the

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old days, prior to the great discoveries of Knorosov, in more recent times, didn't know those other writing systems and didn't know how logographic writing systems actually worked. If they had, they would have cracked the script long before the 1950's. But they didn't do it. The only person who could have done that was Leon del Rosny, who had an enormous comparative approach. The problem is, he didn't have the corpus to work with, he didn't have the wonderful drawings or photographs of the monuments that he could have used, and had really basically at his hand only one or two of the Maya books. If he had really put his mind to it, we believe that he would have cracked it. And it's a tragedy that he didn't live long enough to do it.

Q: Talk about Chinese and how Chinese as a "logographic system", sort of confused the turf when it came--.

Michael Coe: Chinese is an interesting case of a logographic system because there's not just hundreds of signs in Chinese, but thousands of them. To be literate in Chinese, you ought to know at least 4 or 5 thousand of these so-called characters. And there are Chinese dictionaries that have as many as 10 or 12 thousand characters in them. It is, however, a logographic system, which Europeans and early students didn't really understand. They got confused by the sheer number of these things. And yet the Chinese system is logophonetic. That is, it's a-- 95% of all Chinese characters are a combination of a logograph, that is, a sign that is standing for a whole thing, and a phonetic sign, that's right next to it, often on top of it or often on the right, sometimes on the bottom of it. This is the way that this system works; that is, you have a general logographic sign there, a logogram, which tells you the class of things that that particular object that's being named is in, whether it's something connected with water, like an ocean or a waterfall, or whether it's something connected with wood, like a tree, or something connected with fire, such as something that's being cooked. There's a limited number of those signs, that appear. There's somewhere between 100 and 200 of them, that are in general use. And, side by side with this, is a phonetic character, which gives you the general sound of the word, as it was when the system was described. Of course, the Chinese has changed phonetically since then. It has evolved, not exactly the same as it was. But, in general, it gives you the idea. So illiterate Chinese can look at this word, figure out its general meaning from the logographic side of it, and its general sound from the sound character in it. As I say, almost all Chinese characters are that, with a few exceptions- 95% of them are that. If Maya epigraphers, people who thought that they were going to break the Maya writing system, had known that, they wouldn't have fallen into the terrible stupidity of thinking that each one of these signs- those signs- was ideographic, that the whole system was only ideographic and only expressed ideas and concepts. That's just not true. It could express the Chinese language. And it wasn't

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until sharp people, who had a comparative approach to writing systems, who understood how Chinese, how Ancient Cuneiform in the Near East worked, how Ancient Egyptian worked, how- that they had an idea that the Maya system could have been a logographic system, like that, or logophonetic. One of the very few people who knew- who really realized this, back in the 19th Century, was a wonderful French scholar named Leon de Rosny, who knew all these systems, actually, and who got interested in Maya. But he never had enough good drawings, good photographs to work with, didn't know the complete corpus of Maya script, either in the books or in the monuments, to really get very far in it. If he'd lived long enough, we feel he might have cracked it. But it was left to a Soviet scholar, a Russian scholar, in the 20th Century, to really make the great decipherment.

The origin of Maya writing

Q: Talk a little bit about the origins of Maya writing.

Michael Coe: There's a great deal we do not know about the origins of writing in Mesoamerica and a great deal that we don't know about the origins of Maya writing. This is really under investigation right now, with various projects that are finding very, very, very early Maya writing. And we've known about the Olmec for a long time now. They were basically discovered by excavations in the 1930's and 1940's, 1950's. And in the 1960's, I did my hand at that at San Lorenzo. It's the oldest civilization in Mesoamerica. Some people say it's not the mother culture. I and my colleagues say it is. And much of what we later know as Maya or Zapotec or Miztec or Teotihuacán or even Aztec, has Olmec roots. The Olmec had no writing, in the definition I like to use, simply because they didn't have a symbolic system which was tied to language. That's what writing is. We can't prove what language these Olmec spoke. They're very ancient. The civilization which we call Olmec goes back to at least 1200 B.C., in terms of radiocarbon dates- even older if you adjust those dates properly, to perhaps 1500 B.C. And right away, these people could carve huge monuments, carve jade, make magnificent carved pottery figurines, strange creatures and whatnot. And on those monuments and on that pottery, you find a symbolic system, that is, if you want to call it writing, it's marginal. It's *pars pro toto*- a Latin phrase which means taking a part of a body to equal the whole body, or part of a thing to equal the whole thing. They'll take the wing off of, let's say, a dragon, and add a couple of things to it, and that will become one of these dragon gods, perhaps, that they had. So it's a very complicated system, very well codified. They knew exactly what they were doing when they put those signs on there. But the problem is that they don't seem to be tied to language in any way. You can read them, if you want

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to call it that, if you understand their symbolic system. But since there's no writing that we can actually read, phonetically for these people- they didn't have it- we can't really take that interpretation too far. So, it's a symbolic system. It's not writing, to me, because you can't say, yes, this is in an Olmec language. We don't even know what language the Olmec spoke. It could have been Maya, it could not have been Maya. It could have been something we call Mixe-Zoquean which was another language of that area where the Olmecs were, on the Southern Gulf Coast. They probably did speak that. They may have spoken several languages. But the writing system, so called, that people say is writing, has nothing to do with it. So, to me, it's not writing. Some day, somebody may find in late Olmec times, say around 400 B.C., when these people started to -- they didn't peter out, but certainly their culture was changing so fast that it wasn't Olmec anymore. Probably in that period, the first experiments towards linking a symbol system to language were taking place. But we don't know anything about this, at this point.

There are some early monuments elsewhere, in the Zapotec country, up in Monte Alban and Oaxaca, and some early monuments- well, one particular famous one, down on the Gulf coast, at a place called La Mojarra, outside the Maya area, which has a very complicated writing system, which may well have influenced the beginnings of Maya. It seems to be probably starting around the 1st Century B.C. and into the 2nd Century A.D., according to this stela that we have, and other- a few other examples of it. We still don't know what language these people spoke, because the writing system hasn't been deciphered.

The very earliest Maya writing, shows up on little portable objects, like celts or adzes, and small little polished stone pieces, with vertical rows of glyphs. And it also shows up painted at the wonderful new site of San Bartolo, in northeastern Guatemala, in the northern Peten, which is 1st Century B.C. That's the earliest Maya writing that we know. And even the experts, people like David Stuart or Steven Houston, they can't read it, or only a few glyphs that they can interpret, because it's just getting to be phonetic, probably. We need logographs with phonetic complements, or we need syllabic signs that we're sure about, before we can actually read it- and very little of this stuff is readable. We've got the beginnings but I think this is, for the future, for some really hot-shot young epigraphers to go out and work on these early inscriptions, before we really know anything about them. That's the origins of Maya writing, back there. The calendar is a little easier to talk about because those are dates in the -- what becomes what we call the long count Maya system. And we know that in the last century B.C., outside the Maya area, to the west, on the Gulf Coast, and in the state of Chiapas, they were already carving monuments with those dates on it. So that was already invented by that time, and that was an important invention. But it's, again, not writing in the sense that it's

recording anything of their language. It isn't until we get that, that we can say we have writing. And we just don't know. It's one of those things that we have to find out.

Q: We talked about this before. You mention that early stelae and the arrangement of double column widths, may be in some way related to symbolism of corn.

Michael Coe: There is an idea that the full Maya system, which you get already, probably in the late pre-Classic or late formative and the First Century B.C. or First Century A.D., you start getting columns that are paired, vertical columns that are paired, running up and down. Those already start appearing. But later on when- in the early classic, when this becomes really codified on Maya stelae and on Maya monuments, it looks like pairs of vertically grouped corn kernels on a corn cob, that come in pairs, just like that, side by side. Maya is read in these pairs of columns, from left to right. You read them one on the top left and then one on the top right, and then the next one down on the left and the next one down on the right, until you come to the end of it, almost as though you were chewing on a cob of corn, running along it. But I think that's something that comes in later. The very earliest Maya writing is not in paired columns. And that's - and it really is difficult to read.

The role of writing and scribes in Maya culture

Q: What do we know from the evidence that we have about who the scribes were that were doing the writing- were they commoners, were they Greeks, were they men, were they women, were they younger brothers of kings, were they clans of specialized workers? What was their role in the society and who was reading these things? What was the role of writing and writers?

Michael Coe: A really big question is, who made this writing? First of all, who invented the system? Secondly, who were the specialists? Who knew how to write in these societies, in Maya society, which was the only fully literate society in the New World? How widespread was literacy? Could everybody read? And it depends who you're talking to because we have no census reports about this. They may have had it, but all their books have gone, that they had in classic times. So we don't know the answer to this question. We do know, however, who was doing the writing, because, luckily, in some cases, they signed their names, on some of the pottery and on some of the monuments. We know that there were specialists involved in this and we'll call them, first of all, the scribes- what are called in Maya, *u tzib*, "he of the writing". And these people were proud of what they did. They were probably a whole formal group of

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scribes. There was probably more than one kind of scribe, depending upon what they were writing about. Probably the people who carved the monuments were a different lot and they- when they signed their names, they would put another glyph, to say who they were. We can't read that with a huge amount of confidence. We call it the lu-bat glyph. But that introduces people who were carving monuments. And each time we get a signature, it's in a different handwriting, on these monuments, rather interestingly enough. Sometimes you have up to five or six or even eight people working on the same monument, different parts of it.

The people who wrote the books were the real *u tzib*. And we have, on the pottery, on the pictorial pottery, many, many depictions of these people actually writing paper codices with jaguar skin covers. And they were called *u tzib*. They, according to most of us, these people were very, very high ranking in the society. They were either nobles themselves, or perhaps even related to the king. There's one indication of a prince doing this kind of thing. I'm convinced that the kings were literate too- unlike their contemporary counterparts in Europe, who were mainly illiterate -- Medieval times, the days of Charlemagne -- who was totally illiterate; these people, I think, were all literate, like the princes of Asia, were a literate people. We have, on the pottery, actual depictions of people on thrones, as kings, with writing equipment. They wouldn't have done that unless this- they actually could do that kind of thing. So, I think that we know those people could write and they certainly could read- all of them.

There was another class of people who we find on the pottery, and sometimes on the monuments, called- with the title *ah k'u hun*, which some people would be inclined to read, "he of the books"- sort of royal librarians. I think they had multiple jobs, to keep track of tribute, to handle marriage negotiations, to handle ceremonies- all things of that nature. And I think they were what would have been called priests, in much later times. I think here you have these people called *ah k'u hun*, in a very important role- and they were also scribes, they also had writing equipment, brush pens and things of that nature. Now the question is, how widely spread was this through the society? And there's no real way to know. Actually, some of the women, of the high-ranking women, shown on the pictorial pottery, have writing equipment also- pens in their headdresses or in their hands. So I think this was spread to the females. I'm convinced that it was very widespread actually, literacy- and not everybody agrees with me on this.

The writing system is difficult. But so is Japanese difficult for Japanese. And yet Japan has about, I don't know, a 97% literacy rate, with the most difficult writing system in the world. The difficulty of the system has nothing to do with how many people are literate, in a society. And I think Mayan society was quite literate. And a lot of the glyphs, also,

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are quite pictorial. They give you, like Egyptian hieroglyphs, an idea of what they're talking about, right away. So perhaps even semi-literates could get an inkling of what was on the public monuments. The question is, did they have schools? And we have several pots that- Maya vases- that show schooling going on, an older individual (in this case, of course, a God) teaching younger individuals how to write, not only bar and dot numbers, but the glyphs themselves.

The Aztecs had universal education. People don't remember this, but in their day, the Aztecs were the only society with universal education for everybody. And I'm not so sure that the Maya didn't have this. I think the people who say that probably only a tiny percentage of the Mayans were literate, I think they don't know what they're talking about because we don't have the evidence. They had thousands and thousands of books, and probably whole libraries, that have all gone, none of which have survived. We only have four codices, but they're all from late, very late times, long after the classic. This is something that we just don't know about. Someday, somebody is going to find a dry cave with some codices in it, from classic times, and our whole concept of what Maya civilization is, is going to change, fast.

The status of Maya writing at the time of the Spanish conquest

Q: Thank you. That was wonderful. By the time you get to the conquest, what's happened to Maya writing? Is it still in full-fledge, or has it changed in the past 800 years or so, 700 years, since the height of the classic? And talk a bit about the arrival of Cortez and Peter Martyr's report- what did they find when they come?

Michael Coe: By the time the Spaniards arrived in Yucatán, or off the coast of Yucatán, the island of Cozumel and Yucatán itself, Maya writing had changed in some respects from the way it was in the Classic. There were no more inscribed monuments. Those had died out very swiftly after 800, 850 A.D. They were gone. Nobody was doing that kind of thing. The scribes had probably largely disappeared, by this time. Probably a whole scribal class was wiped out when the royal houses were wiped out at the end of the Classic. Eric Thompson always thought by revolution, and I think he is probably right, rather than, say, conquest from the outside. Those people were gone and the iconography changes, the interest in many of their gods disappears. You have the appearance of a feathered serpent cult and whatnot. We only have four books from this era, really, to talk about, a few painted inscriptions here and there, but not much.

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But one of these books is the Dresden Codex, which is an extraordinarily complex, advanced piece of work that a lot of us think was copied from classic prototypes. It contains a great deal of astronomy. In fact, most of what we know about Maya astronomy is in the Dresden Codex- how they tracked the planet Venus, how they calculated lunar and solar eclipses. That's all in there. It's a very advanced piece of work and very complicated. It's got no history, unfortunately, because it's all ritual, and so forth. And it's beautifully made. There's no question about it. So there must have been a lot of books like it, and there are surviving scribes, at this point, who can turn out such a thing, with a lot of the ancient knowledge.

Now, when Cortez lands on Cozumel, the first thing he goes is to start looting various houses that he saw, to see what he could get out of them. And among the stuff that he got, were some books, according to the records about Cortez. I'm fairly convinced that one of these books was the Dresden Codex. And he took this with him when he went around the coast of Yucatán, and landed on the coast of Veracruz. And on the coast of Veracruz, in 1519, when he was there, he had to give- send a quarter of his loot- or a fifth of his loot, excuse me- back to Spain, as a Royal Fifth- it belonged to the Crown. And I think at that point, The Dresden Codex crossed the Atlantic and landed in Cadiz, the port of Spain, for its entry, and probably ended up in Madrid, eventually, and found its way, somehow or another, to Central Europe. It landed in the Dresden Royal Library in the- sometime in the 18th Century. But at least then it was in the Library of the Elector of Saxony, the King of Saxony, where it was then seen later on and studied by the great Ernst Förstemann. The Dresden Codex shows that at the time of the conquests, there were people who could do this.

Now the other codices: the Grolier is probably early post-Classic, and it's simply a Venus calendar. It doesn't tell us much other than that. It's sort of the Toltec-Maya period. The Paris Codex and the Madrid Codex, which first came up in two parts- the Tro and the Corteziano, but as one codex, those are very crudely done. They contain a lot of fascinating information. But the beauty of Classic books had disappeared by then. That's not true for the Dresden. The Dresden is beautifully made. I think it was written partly with- using quill pens. I've inspected it, actually, in person, in the library, the State Library in Dresden, in East Germany. And it's so beautiful. It's really what a Classic book would have looked like. The other two very late ones, the Madrid and the Paris, are really crummy looking jobs. And it's even been suggested, because there are so many mistakes in it, that those scribes had some kind of literary aphasia. They got things mixed up. But they're important, there's no question about that, and they have even some astronomical information. However, they're badly done. And I think writing was in a bad way, at the time of the conquest.

Of course, the Spanish friars, the early Franciscans, like Bishop Landa, made it much worse by confiscating every single codex they could get their hands on, and making bonfires of them. I'm sure Landa wasn't the only one who had his bonfire- the rest of them did too. A couple of the friars were sorry about this and were really interested in their content and had gone so far, we think, to actually learn how to do Maya hieroglyphic writing. But they didn't get very far and we don't have their records, unfortunately. We would have cracked the Maya script long, long before. The writing system totally died out in the century that followed the Spanish conquest. People were probably burned at the stake for writing in the old system, early on, and certainly suffered all the punishments that could be inflicted on them by the early Catholic missionaries. And effectively, by the 17th and 18th Century- by the 18th Century, I don't think anybody could write.

The impact for good and ill of Bishop Landa

Q: Let's go back to Landa's arrival. Talk a little bit about who Landa was. He comes in there and there's a bit of a honeymoon period when he's fascinated with Maya culture and is learning from his friend, Gaspar Chi, about the Mayan writing system and all things Maya, and then that really changes, as if he feels betrayed by what he's learned about- that they're still, in spite of their baptism, practicing the old ways. Talk about that a bit, before and after- what happened there.

Michael Coe: Well Bishop Diego de Landa was one of the world's most complex people, actually. He was a Franciscan, a follower of Frances, and yet very often a very cruel man- cruel to the people underneath him, to the Maya Indians, and their souls were in his hands. But he inflicted a primitive inquisition on them. It was incredible in its ferocity. At the same time, while destroying everything that he could find that was what he would call superstition- in other words, a good part of their culture- he was trying to record it at the same time, which, to us, it seems anomalous that you would do such a thing. But he did. Unfortunately, his manuscript, which he wrote in Spain when he was sent back under a dark cloud to answer accusations about his cruelty and abuse of office, while he was in Spain he wrote this thing, *the Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatán*- "The History of the Things of Yucatán". And a great deal of what we know about the Maya comes from Bishop Landa. We couldn't really write anything meaningful in a lot of aspects, without citing Bishop Landa.

And among these are several pages in it which he claims to lay forth the writing system, which he called an *abecedario*, an ABC, i.e., an alphabet. And, of course, we know that

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it's not an alphabet at all. It's a logosyllabic system. What he gives us in this is a kind of much flawed syllabary, but flawed in the sense that he was trying to interpret these as letters, and they're not, they're syllabic signs. On the other hand, he used a very good source, Gaspar Antonio Chi, who was a native noble, probably had been a scribe, to explain this to him. And once this was rediscovered by Brasseur de Bourbourg, this amazing manuscript, we had, in our hands, the clue as to how to crack this script. This is the exact equivalent, these pages of Landa, of the Rosetta Stone. It's a bilingual, in this case, in Yucatec Maya, as it was spoken in the 16th Century in Yucatán, and the hieroglyphic system. It covers only the syllabic signs. And as was proven later on by Yuri Valentinovich Knorosov, every single one of the signs that he gives can be attested as a valid syllabic sign. For years, nobody understood this, after Brasseur's discovery. Brasseur himself tried to translate part of the Madrid Codex, using Landa's ABC, and completely fouled it up. In fact, he so misunderstood the system that he read the glyphs and the codex backwards- we know they're read from left to right, top to bottom, and he got them backwards. Nobody really believed this, for a long time.

Q:. Wasn't there a period, a sort of honeymoon period? Landa came in and learned Yucatec, I believe, went and spent time in the villages, built the monastery at Izamal. Didn't his persecutions begin with auto da fe and sort of continue from there? Was he doing that kind of scourging, persecution before that time?

Michael Coe: Diego de Landa was an extremely good linguist- thank goodness- really very, very good. His contemporaries thought that he was the European, the Spaniard who knew Yucatec best, who could speak Maya best. And all these early Franciscans, who were in Yucatán, learned Maya very, very early. We have important vocabularies from them, grammars and so forth. So he knew the language well. It wasn't that he was going in cold. And he knew that Gaspar Antonio Chi was a very good informant. The problem was that with his pre-conception about the writing system, he really, not understanding that he was dealing with a syllabary, and with no inkling that it was a logographic or logosyllabic system, a complex system, he kind of misinterpreted what Chi was telling him. And what he would--.

Q: You were also talking about his persecutions of the Maya. I think you told me earlier that even in his death, a lot of Maya mourned his death and a lot of Maya--.

Michael Coe: Well, that's- if you want to get into that, yes, it's true. I've said that Landa was a complex character. He had- he was a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, as far as the Maya were concerned. And sometimes he'd be the kindly Dr. Jekyll and sometimes he'd be the ferocious Mr. Hyde. But when he did die, back in Spain, when the word reached the Maya, most of them were very sorry. They- perhaps it's the whole idea that you love

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your captor- I think it's called a captive syndrome -- but there were many of them who really did mourn him and who loved him. There's no question about it. So he is both a lovable and a hateful person, at the same time- at one and the same time- as he was the destroyer of Maya civilization and in many senses, its preserver.

The persistence of scribal activity in the books of Chilam Balam and the Caste War Letters

Q: Let's talk about that and leading up to the way things survived the caste era and beyond -- and manuscripts that have survived because of that.

Michael Coe: The early Franciscans in Yucatán set up schools for probably the Native nobility- the children of the Native nobility. They'd done the same thing in Central Mexico with the children of the Aztec nobility. They had experience with this, as a way to extirpate the idolatrous ways of their parents and grandparents and so forth. And these were conducted in Maya, but they taught them Spanish and Latin at the same time. Some of these people were inducted as cantors into the Native church, into the Native Catholic church, in Yucatán. *Maestro cantor* was the title that they received. And they acted as scribes at the same time. And there were also other scribes, now writing, not in the Maya script but in the Roman, or Latin derived script, that the Spaniards had brought with them. And they adapted to this very, very fast. They saw its utility, and it was easier to use, there's no question about it, than the complex Maya script. So the Maya script starts dying out and the Roman script starts taking its place. But they're still writing in Maya -- that is, in the Yucatec Maya language, and writing all kinds of things, some of which are simply churchly things, or keeping accounts for the Franciscans and so forth, and probably copying out music to sing in the churches and so forth. On the other hand, they were also guarding their own Native traditions, which the Spaniards or the Franciscan friars and others did not know about. And the most important collection of these is called The Books of Chilam Balam. Each community, hidden away from the Spaniards, had a scribe writing in Roman characters, in our letters, a,b,c, but ancient Maya things, which are The Books of Chilam Balam. So you have a Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel, or a book of Chilam Balam of Mani or Tikal, or -- you name the community. They probably still exist in the hands of scribes in remote Maya communities or hidden away from what goes on in the church, about which the authorities don't know. Some of these, of course, have made their way into great university collections and so forth. Princeton has the book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel, the most important of them all. And these were really made by scribes who were really, in many respects, the intellectual descendents of the old scribes in Classic times who were writing in folding screen books. So they are important repositories of information. And they have been studied by

Western scholars, and most of us believe that they are transcriptions in Roman letters of hieroglyphic texts.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about how the scribes acted during the Caste Wars?

Michael Coe: Yes. I'm not a specialist on this but I've read something of it.

Q: General idea.

Michael Coe: Yes. These scribes played an extremely important role in the Caste Wars of the 19th Century, in Yucatán, in which several times the whites, the descendents of the Spaniards, were almost driven out of the Maya lowlands, but finally, as the stories go, they retreated and went back to their communities because it was time to plant the corn. So the insurgency never really carried through to the end. But it was a serious insurgency, and the various Maya commanders against the Spanish Yucatecans kept in touch with each other through scribes, and, of course, writing in Roman letters, but correspondence between each other, a great deal of that has survived and is in library collections and has been studied. So these scribes played the role that today the Signal Corps or the national security agency would play with us. They were the communications experts. And, again, this is probably something that went on in Classic times. Landa says -- or somebody says, I've forgotten who -- that they didn't write letters to each other. I don't believe that for one minute. I think in Classic times they were perfectly capable of writing letters to each other, and undoubtedly did. And they were certainly doing that in the Caste Wars.

Q: It brings up the point of what survives and what didn't, from the Ancient Maya things. Letters don't survive because they would have been written on paper. Isn't that right? What survives are the kinds of things that were written on stone.

Michael Coe: Well, none of these letters, of course, would have survived, from Classic times, as none of the codices has survived, because they were all on bark paper, covered with thin layers of white stucco or gesso, but yet still totally perishable. And I think that vast quantities of them were destroyed, at the end of the Classic, by the same people who were destroying the monuments and defacing the murals. But certainly any codices that had been left behind in libraries and buildings would have disintegrated within probably ten years, given the amount of rain and moisture and mould and bugs and all the other things in the Tropics that will take care of paper. Nothing survived of this- absolutely nothing.

Early exploration in the Maya region and early publication of Maya texts

Q: Great. Thank you. Let's move on to the early explorations in the Maya region. We have a couple of early expeditions- the Calderon and so forth.

Michael Coe: Don't pin me down to dates now.

Q: Don't worry about that.

Michael Coe: The only one that I really know about is Del Rio.

Q: Let's talk about Del Rio.

Michael Coe: During the latter part of the 18th Century, the person on the throne was- of Spain- was Charles III, who was often considered to be the only- prior to the present incumbent- the only really intelligent Bourbon King. He was a man of the Enlightenment, without any question. He stopped the Spanish Inquisition, he did many things of a highly cultured, forward thinking man. And he was interested in history and in science and in exploration. And he ordered the exploration, in various parts of his territories, in the New World, of the antiquities, of the ancient things. And he wanted a record of them. One of the people that was in his employ was Antonio Del Rio, who was a Spanish officer. And he went to the site of Palenque, in the late 18th Century, where he conducted explorations. Today people are bad-mouthing this man because it's been said that he just made holes in everything and didn't do this and didn't do this, the way a modern archaeologist would do. But, in fact, he was a very careful excavator and did a first-rate job and kept excellent records, and sent collections back to Spain, and an account of what he had found. And his report was published in the early 19th Century in, of all places, London. It never got published in Spain in his day. And it was called *Description of an Ancient City*, meaning Palenque, with these wonderful plates that showed some of the monuments of Palenque, the great reliefs, that are in the Cross Group at Palenque. It was the first time anybody had seen seriously what one of these ancient Maya monuments looked like.

Q: Do we know anything about the artist who was with him, Armendariz?

Michael Coe: I don't know much about the guy. They were re-drawn by Waldeck. The plates are by Waldeck, based on this earlier set of drawings. The important thing is that Stephens read this book.

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Q: Right. We'll get to Stephens but--. Let's talk about the earliest publications -- 1796, Racknitz publishes the first image of a Maya thing---

Michael Coe: The Dresden Codex, of course, probably from the mid-18th Century, was known and catalogued in the Elector's Library, in Saxony, in Dresden. It was public knowledge that this thing was there. And towards the end of the 18th Century, various people had seen it, and in the beginning of the 19th Century got quite interested in this strange codex. And there was an amazing character in Germany, at the time, named von Racknitz, who I think had the title of Baron. He was a kind of an interior decorator of his day and theater designer, sort of like Cecil Beaton in the 1930's and '40's, this kind of person. And he was interested in producing theater sets for the nobility and aristocracy and royalty of Europe, in various styles, from various epochs -- like, Pompeii had been discovered at this point, Pompeian stuff.

Well, in one of his illustrations, in a book that he turned out called *The Taste of All Nations* which shows these sort of set designs, has of all things on its walls, details from The Dresden Codex -- all sorts of bars and dot numbers and some of the gods that are in the tables that are in there-- like a Vulture God shows up on the walls. So here he is. He calls this, "In the Mexican Taste"-- he didn't differentiate between the Mexicans, let's say the Aztecs, and the Mayas, at this point. But he knew about it, and people were interested.

By 1810, the first publication of The Dresden Codex, or part of it, comes out. Now this is a serious publication. This is four of the five pages of the Venus Tables, in The Dresden Codex, which have hundreds and hundreds of hieroglyphs involved and pictures of gods doing various things on it, published in really quite accurate detail by Alexander von Humboldt, the great really creator of geographical science in Europe -- a wonderful botanist, explorer and everything, a polymath all around. And this publication gets widely disseminated because Humboldt was a man of universal fame. Everybody wanted to read Humboldt, on both sides of the Atlantic. People got truly interested in this.

Then, in the early 1820's, in London, gets published this very fine account by Del Rio of Palenque and his explorations, with these amazing plates that were re-worked by the incredible, so-called Count Waldeck, that are reasonably accurate. You couldn't really do a good piece of epigraphy or translation of these just on the basis of these glyphs. But it gives you an idea of what some of the great Palenque reliefs looked like. And that intrigued several people, including John Lloyd Stephens, the-- with Frederick Catherwood, his artist, the founder of Maya studies.

Q: Let's talk a little bit, because it sort of leads into Racknitz as well, about the opening of Egypt in the time of Napoleon.

Michael Coe: Yes, right. Enormous interest in the non-Classical world.

Q: Yes, and in unknown writing systems and all of that. Let's talk a bit about what that did to the atmosphere.

Michael Coe: I'm no huge follower or admirer of Napoleon as Emperor. But Napoleon did some important things, and his conquest of Egypt resulted in some amazing discoveries. He brought with him a whole group of scientists, to Egypt. It was, in some respects, the first kind of multidisciplinary scientific expedition, including epigraphers and artists. And these people made records of the Egyptian monuments that were absolutely supreme. I think today they're still considered masterpieces. Shortly thereafter, a young scholar in France, named Champollion, looking at all of these -- and somebody who had great linguistic abilities and experience in non-Classical languages, and who had, on his own, bothered to learn Coptic, one of the languages of Egypt, which turns out to be the language of the hieroglyphs -- he began to work on this. And eventually, after the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, and its dissemination to the world by basically the French and the British who captured it, one could now read this writing system. And there was an enormous interest in Europe --and in America -- in Ancient Egypt and, in fact, in ancient civilizations in general. This stimulated people to want to go to the Near East and dig up the civilizations there, to India, to the Far East and so forth, and also to the New World. And so the atmosphere was perfect for people like Stephens and Catherwood, who had been to Egypt and worked there, to really do something about this.

The work of Constantine Rafinesque, Stephens and Catherwood, de Bourbourg, Ernst Förstemann, and Alfred Maudslay

Q: Let's talk about Rafinesque, who had available to him the stimulation of Champollion and what he had done, and also Humboldt...

Michael Coe: One of the most extraordinary characters to ever show up in this whole field of the history of the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing was Constantine Rafinesque, who was born in Constantinople, what's now Istanbul, and migrated, several times, to the United States where he did, in a very spotty, controversial career, an amazing amount of botanical and zoological explorations. And, as a matter of fact, today, I believe it's established, among biologists at any rate, that he named more species

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than any other person in history. And those names have stuck. Some people think that he was a fraud because he discovered and published what he claimed was the migration legend of the Lenape Indians, with hieroglyphs to go with it- i.e., what we would know as the Delaware today. This is now known to be a fraud. This doesn't mean that he wasn't taken in by a fraud. He was taken in by it. I don't think he produced it himself. But one thing he did, that will endear him to Mayanists forever, was that he discovered how to read bar and dot numbers. He had read Champollion and gotten all excited by it. In fact, he corresponded with Champollion. We have no knowledge whether Champollion ever bothered to write him back. He was then living in Philadelphia. He was always out of money. He had all these schemes, one of which would fall and then he'd have another financial scheme and that would bust. He got thrown out of one university, Transylvania University in Kentucky, because he couldn't get along with anybody. But he was just one of those eccentrics. And he published a letter, like a letter to some scholar, in his own journal. He was a vanity publisher and all his publishing was done with his own money and at his own time, in his own press, in his own journal. In one of his journals, he published a study, or suggestions about how these new hieroglyphs, found in Palenque, and also in the Dresden Codex, could be deciphered.

He was the first person to realize that what he had seen in Humboldt, those four pages of the Dresden Codex, and what had been in Del Rio's illustrations, from Palenque, were one and the same hieroglyphic system. Secondly, he suggested that these people were not from outer space or migrant Hebrews from the Old World, or Welshmen or anything like that, but rather that they were the Mayas themselves who were living in the area, speaking this language, and that if you could learn that language, you'd have one foot up, in a possible decipherment. Thirdly, he looked at these bar and dot numbers, that Humboldt had published in The Dresden Codex, and that showed up also at Palenque, which in those days people called Otulum, which is one of its local names. And he said that, look, there's these bars and dots, but you never get more than four dots, in any one of these concatenations of bars and dots. A bar probably stands for 5. One would be one dot, two would be two dots, three would be three dots, four dots, and then you'd have a bar. So that when you wanted to write the number 6, you'd have a bar for 5 and then a dot would make it 6; two dots and a bar, a 7; three dots and a bar, 8; and so on. And that was the first time anybody had ever deciphered a Maya hieroglyph. That is the beginning of the decipherment.

<crew talk>

Michael Coe: Rafinesque- there's a new biography of him just out. It isn't very good, unfortunately.

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Q: There is a new biography?

Michael Coe: Yes. The guy who wanted to do a biography for years was Victor Wolfgang Von Hagen, who was another eccentric like Rafinesque, but he never completed it. He died in Italy before--. I know his literary executor in Italy, up in Tuscany. I was just staying with him. And all of Von Hagen's stuff is in a steamer truck in the basement. And he was writing a biography of Rafinesque. He would have been the guy to do it too.

<crew talk re Stephens and Catherwood>

Q: How did they get into this business? There were no Carnegie endowments, no institutional support? How did these guys get themselves down there and how did they go about doing what they did?

Michael Coe: Well, every Mayanist- in fact, everybody who knows anything at all about New World civilization, has John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood as their two Patron Saints. These two people were the greatest explorers who ever came to the Maya area, and they were really the most important ones because they were the effective discoverers of the Maya civilization. They were the ones who brought the Maya to the world. Stephens books, with Catherwood's illustrations, were best sellers in their day- and they'd be best sellers in any day. They'd even appear on The New York Times list today, they sold so many copies- went through many, many editions. Their two great, two volume works on the Maya area are really marvelous books.

And they got into this whole thing because they had already been great explorers in the Old World. Stephens had had two successful travel books, one to Eastern Europe and Russia, and one to the Middle East and Egypt and the Holy Land. And Catherwood was a topographical artist, a British topographical artist, with vast experience in Egypt, already well known. Stephens was a wealthy man in his own right. So bankrolling expeditions was no problem for him, although he probably did get some money from the American government, since he was on a diplomatic mission for President Martin Van Buren. Catherwood, on the other hand, did this as a business venture because he was making money from the sale of his pictures and, in particular, from panoramas, which he could produce -- these enormous 360 degree paintings that you sort of got inside of and you took kind of a 3D trip into the past, and he specialized in that. So he was gathering information on that. He was a fine topographical artist who had some probably good equipment with him, like the camera lucida which he could use as a mechanical aid to drawing -- so it was extremely accurate. And they became friends right away. They met in London and they decided to do this trip.

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And they did it twice. They didn't get everywhere though. People think that they covered the whole Maya area. They didn't cover northern Guatemala. They only heard rumors about it, but never went in there. They never saw sites like Tikal or Uaxactun or Calakmul or places of this sort, in the Central Maya area. But they saw amazing sites in the southeastern part of the Maya area -- Copán and Quiriguá. And, of course, famously, Stephens bought Copán, I think with the intention of eventually sending a lot of that sculpture up for public exhibit, in conjunction with one of Catherwood's famous panoramas, say in New York or Philadelphia or someplace like that.

Q: The first site they got into was Copán. Can you describe a little bit of what their impressions were, what they thought they were dealing with, some of Catherwood's difficulties or what he went through trying to record these things.

Michael Coe: When they reached Central America, of course, initially, the whole place was in chaos, politically -- not so much Yucatán, that was peaceful, but the countries we know of as Central America -- Guatemala and Honduras, in particular. And nobody knew who was in charge of what. So it was a very dangerous area that they went into. And they went straight to Copán, that they'd heard about. Copán, like Palenque, was one of those ancient Maya sites that had never really been lost. People knew about it. There were reports about it, from rather early ones. And they had known that a man named Galindo -- actually an Irish officer -- had been in there and done some rather good explorations. But they wanted to see it for themselves.

And when they got in there, of course, they found total ignorance on the part of the local people. They knew nothing about it. These people were really not Mayas at all by that time, had no touch whatsoever with the past, and little interest in it. So they were able to- Stephens was able to come up with some- I've forgotten exactly what it was but it was probably in the nature of about \$50.00, bought the whole thing. And they had no anti-malarial drugs with them- they didn't exist other than quinine, at that time. They had no bug repellents. The local food was very difficult to come by and very bad when they got it. Today, you can't conceive of what it was like. Nobody would think about moving, with the little equipment that they had. On their explorations beyond Copán, they got into places where there were so many mosquitoes at night they'd have to sleep in the streams to keep the bugs off of them. But at Copán, they saw the remains of this ancient city, that had tumbled down, that was in the jungle, in total ruin, with obvious hieroglyphic inscriptions there. And nobody could read them, they thought -- even though Rafinesque had a crack at it -- nobody could really read them. And Stephens, interestingly enough, in his first set of books on this subject, said about Copán that "nobody can read them. Maybe a Champollion will come someday and read them, and

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when he does read them, you will see that these things are history. This is the history of the great kings and queens who lived in this place.” Well, in subsequent years, in fact in the next century and a half, everybody said, oh, no, there’s no history on these monuments and whatnot. Now we know that Stephens was completely right, as he was in many things. He was prescient about this. He knew exactly what was going on. He’d seen other civilizations that had a history, like Egypt, and he said, “this is like that, they must have had a history and that must be what this is about. If only we could read them!”

But the great thing was they recorded what they saw. And Catherwood’s drawings are wonderful, they really are. I’ve seen it said that he romanticizes them. Well, he was a man of his time. They’re still accurate and they’re wonderful, wonderful pictures.

<crew talk re Bourbourg>

Q: ... what he found and what he made of it.

Michael Coe: The Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg was another one of those 19th Century giants on whose shoulders we try to stand. While he made a complete hash of translating the only Maya Codex that he ever had in his hands, the one that’s in Madrid, nevertheless he was one of the great discoverers. And what he could discover were manuscripts. He was the greatest manuscript discoverer of all time, regarding the Maya civilization. There’s no question about it. And he just nosed them out. He was a French Abbe, and -- a wonderful title that enables him to be a man of the cloth, and obviously he can’t get married. But French Abbés could do almost everything, including have affairs with ladies, or what they wanted, and they could be scholars at the same time. They were basically priests- scholar priests is what they were, footloose and fancy free because they really weren’t tied down to any one particular church, although in Guatemala he did eventually end up in the church in Rabinal, in the highlands of Guatemala, where he made again great discoveries. He was free to do what he wanted to do. He ended up living in a hotel on the Piazza Minerva, right above that wonderful obelisk on the elephant that his predecessor, Athanasius Kircher had tried to crack.

The Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg was the one who discovered, for instance, the Popol Vuh. Now there’s some argument whether he was the first person to actually get the manuscript out, but he certainly was the one who brought it to the attention of the world. There’s no question about it. The Rabinal Achi, which is our only really surviving, complete Maya drama, from the town of Rabinal, in the kekchi language, or the Rabinal dialect of the kekchi language, he was the one who published that one to the world, also. The most important discovery though, that he made, were, I think undoubtedly- or a piece of scholarship- was the Popol Vuh. This is the single most important myth that we have

from the entire New World, probably the most important piece of literature ever produced in the Western Hemisphere and, as far as I'm concerned, the absolute Bible of Maya studies. Everything we do today that has to do with iconography and interpreting what we see, seems to go back to the Popol Vuh. And it's thanks to Brasseur de Bourbourg that we really have this.

<crew talk>

Q: If you could repeat some of what you said about his role as an Abbé and what his situation was. And then talk a little bit about his travels... and then, at the end, talk about the prejudices and misconceptions that he applied when he finally found the Landa manuscripts, and how he managed to botch that up.

Michael Coe: All right. I forgot about the Landa manuscript. I'll end up with that.

<crew talk>

Michael Coe: All right. The Abbé Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg. Brasseur de Bourbourg was one of these 19th Century giants, on whose shoulders all Mayanists stand, for one reason or another. But the basic reason is that he was the great discover of manuscripts, relating to the Maya civilization- probably the most important role that anyone could have played back in his day, before the script was really deciphered. He was the one who-- if he didn't discover it, he certainly brought it to the attention of the world -- he was the one who brought the Popol Vuh to the attention of scholarship. And the Popol Vuh, which is the origin and creation myth and great epic myth of the Ki'che' Maya nation, this is the most important piece of mythology that we have, for the Maya, and on which all subsequent iconographic research, interpreting what you see in Maya murals or what you see in the codices, the gods and so forth- a great deal of this depends upon the Popol Vuh. It's a bible, as far as we're concerned, for Maya studies. He discovered the Rabinal Achi, went up to Rabinal in Guatemala and became a priest in the church of Rabinal. And he was the one who brought to the attention of the world the most complete extent Maya drama that we have in Quiche Maya, or at least the Rabinal dialect of Ki'che' Maya, to give us an idea of the kind of theatrics that once existed, before the Spaniards got there.

But probably most important of all was his discovery of the manuscript of Bishop Landa, the Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatán, in a library in Madrid. And one has to remember that this manuscript, which he published, and studied, which contains Landa's famous description of the script, that this is really a late copy and probably a kind of Reader's Digest condensation of a much longer manuscript that has never been discovered, that

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someday we hope somebody poring through some archive is going to find. But it was enormously important. And, unfortunately, poor old Brasseur took the so-called alphabet that Landa gives us, that we now know was a kind of a flawed syllabary, and he tried to translate part of the Madrid Codex, using this. And it was a complete hash. The poor man didn't know what- really understand what kind of a system this was. He didn't understand- nobody did at that point- what a logographic script was- and at least nobody in the Maya area understood this. And then he read the thing backwards. So he's got the writing system going in the wrong direction. So no wonder it came out a complete mess. And, of course, his name was mud from then on, as far as epigraphers go. But I think he was a great man. Nobody really could discover as much as he did. And he traveled back and forth between Europe and the New World, to Central America, and back to Europe, to find these things. And then, kind of sadly in his last days, the old Abbé, who really had very few ecclesiastical duties- he was a scholar priest, like French Abbés were- he ended up at his last days as a kind of a resident of a hotel on the Piazza Minerva, in Rome, where he could look out, ironically speaking, on that little obelisk, sitting on that lovely little elephant, in the Piazza Minerva that Athanasius Kircher, his predecessor, also had made a mess of, trying to translate, a good century or so before.

Q: Great. That's excellent. Now could you just talk a little bit about when Brasseur tackled the Troano, his particular thing was Atlantis.

Michael Coe: Unfortunately, our friend Brasseur de Bourbourg was not a really fine culture historian. And, like a lot of people, in Europe and in America, he was entranced with various made-up mythologies and fantasies about who had peopled the New World. One has only to think that there were very few Americans, other than a few odd scholars, who would credit the mounds in the Midwestern United States, to the Indians, who were living in the same area. And the same thing was true with Central America. Nobody wanted to credit those ruins with having actually been once cities occupied by the same Indians that they were looking at. And Brasseur was one of those. And he was entranced with the whole myth of Atlantis, that is found in the writings of the philosopher, Plato, the story of this whole civilization, city, country, that had been out in the Atlantic, beyond the Pillars of Hercules, supposedly, that had subsided, sort of inundated and whatnot. And that these people who'd made these ruins in the Maya area, as far as he was concerned, came from Atlantis.

Well, he was just the first of a whole series of crackpots that have written on subjects like this. They haven't stopped till today. We have people from outer space coming in, with von Daniken's astronauts or cosmonauts or what have you arriving in Palenque and gosh knows where, and 10 lost tribes of Israel, that's come up -- even since the days of the

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Spaniards, that they were the 10 lost tribes. Over and over again, people ascribing the construction of those great cities to anybody but the Native Americans. Stephens and Catherwood never fell into this little mistake -- thank goodness. And that's why we still revere and respect them today.

<crew talk>

Q: --<re Forstemann> --library at Dresden, what he found there and what he made of it. Adventures in the filing cabinet and the mind.

Michael Coe: Yes. Not all epigraphers, and even not all archaeologists, have to work in the field- go out into the jungles or into the deserts and whatnot, to find important things about ancient civilizations. Much of the really important work in the Mayanist field, as in other fields studying ancient civilizations, has been done behind a desk, looking at books, looking at reports, looking at collections in museums. This is an unsung part of the whole field. It's not all Indiana Jones, by a long shot. And some of the greatest adventures are in the mind. I always like to quote Raquel Welch, the actress. When they asked her years ago what she thought was the greatest erogenous zone, and she said, the brain. And she's right. And this is true in archaeology, as in other subjects. And one of the great brains in this was Ernst Förstemann, who was a librarian, in the Royal Library, in Saxony, in Germany, when-- Germany was divided into a lot of little countries, in those days, one of which was the Electorate of Saxony, with its marvelous library and the beautiful city of Dresden that unfortunately suffered during the Second World War, extensive bombing. And he was the Elector's Royal Librarian. This is what he did. He never went anywhere, basically, except did this. And he had the Dresden Codex in his hands, which had been in there since the previous century. Now we're talking about the latter part of the 19th Century, the second half. And he began studying this. He published it in 1880, in a magnificent facsimile edition. It's still the greatest edition, I think, of any Native American codex, done in- all in color and extreme accuracy. You can take a magnifying glass to it and read every last glyph in it. This was when it was in splendid condition, or good condition, because it hadn't suffered from being under water, as it did during the 2nd World War, at one point, during the saturation bombing of Dresden. It survived, but slightly damaged.

Förstemann studied this and he- sitting in his library -- he was the first person to work out the details of the Maya calendar, how the complex Maya calendar worked -- the calendar round of 365 days operating against the 260 day sacred calendar. He found the sacred almanacs in the book, how this operated. He found the lunar tables in there. He found the Venus tables in there. And he was the first person, most of us believe, to work out the Long Count, the day to day count from a certain point in the year 3114 B.C., till our

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own day, that the Maya kept up, just day by day by day by day, on which all of our knowledge of Maya chronology depends. Now he didn't correlate it with the Christian calendar. That came later with the American, J.T. Goodman, Joseph Goodman, who was Mark Twain's first editor out there in Nevada. But he did discover how the calendar worked. And this was a first great move ahead since Rafinesque had found out how to read bar and dot numbers. And it revolutionized Maya studies. So he was a great, great man, without any question- again, one of the saints in heaven, as far as we're concerned.

Q: All right. Excellent. Could you just give me one more take of what you said about the notion of an adventurer behind a desk, referring specifically of course to how he felt his adventures took place among the card catalogues and in that library...

Michael Coe: Well Ernst Förstemann was a perfect example of how somebody does not have to put on a pith helmet and carry a machete in his hand and camera slung around his neck, to make great discoveries- that -- Förstemann did this as a dusty librarian, sitting in a dusty office in a dusty library, with a probably dusty old book, which in this case was The Dresden Codex. He didn't have to move one inch, but just sit there behind his desk, and to project himself. And everything we know about the Maya into the past, like a time traveler, this is what he was. He was a traveler who never traveled. He traveled in his mind, and managed to reach the mind of the Maya. To me, that's the most exciting thing of all. One reads every day about this tomb and that tomb being discovered, changing everything, which is generally a lot of hyperbole. Basically, a lot of the great discoveries and changes that have been made, about our knowledge of the Maya, have been made by library research.

Q: Great. That's excellent. Let's talk about Maudslay and the building up of a corpus, over the course of time.

Michael Coe: Until nearly the end of the 19th Century, there was no real corpus of Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions. The artists who'd been there, like Catherwood and some of his predecessors and the people who followed, really didn't make a record of the inscriptions, the way, let's say, in Egypt the scientists and artists who accompanied Napoleon to Egypt -- Napoleon's conquest of the Nile -- the way they did. The kind of materials available to Egyptologists didn't exist for anybody interested in deciphering Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions, until the latter part of the 19th Century when one person arrived on the scene, Alfred Percival Maudslay, a well educated Englishman who had married into American money. He married a lady from California who bankrolled all his expeditions. And he made a number of trips at his own expense or, let's put it this way, at his wife's expense, to Central America and to Yucatán, and bringing a large format

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camera with him, bringing the equipment to make moulds, in the field. Remember, this is in the days before air travel or helicopters or modern roads or anything like that. Mule trains is the way he did it. And he went through most of the then known important Maya sites, and made this incredible record of large-scale photographs, large format photographs, and these moulds that he made, and brought them out, at great trouble, back to England, where he had a very talented artist, Miss Annie Hunter, make extremely good drawings of all of these. And then through connections with some biologists, who were publishing the biology of Central America, a multi-volume thing, in five volumes- four of plates and one of text- he gave us our first real corpus, that anybody could work with. You could actually see, at great detail and with great accuracy, every single hieroglyph, on a particular inscription, for the very first time. And it was that that made all subsequent advance possible.

He was really a selfless, wonderful man. I like to think he was the person in this very contentious field that everybody has agreed on, that he was really a wonderful person. And while he never made any decipherments himself, he made it possible for others to do it. And you can't get anywhere without a corpus, if you're going to deal with an ancient body of inscriptions and try to crack an unknown script. You have to have a really good record, and he was the first one to make it.

The Maya Corpus Project

Q: The whole issue of having an adequate representation of everything that's been found continues to this day. Steve Houston said the other day that he felt that one of the reasons that the big push and advances in the '80's and '90's in understanding Maya politics and everything else was because this flood of stuff that has come out through Ian Graham's corpus project.

Michael Coe: Do you want me to talk about that?

Q: Sure. You might define what a corpus is too because people might not know that word.

Michael Coe: Well, a corpus in inscriptions means that you have a body of- corpus is just the Latin word for body. It means that you have a complete body of inscriptions, let's say from a particular site. You can have a corpus of all known inscriptions from Copán or a corpus of all known inscriptions from Tikal, et cetera. And after Maudslay, unfortunately- after he retired and retired from the field, very little was done along these lines. The Carnegie Institution of Washington, for instance, which was in the field from

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the- even before the First World War, until its final demise as a research institution in Central America, they never did anything along these lines at all, simply because the people who were in the field and who were in charge of looking at these things, thought that the dates were the only things important on the monuments- you really didn't have to publish the whole thing, all the other stuff, that they couldn't read, because everything was dates. It just came to be a whole series of calendrical notations. And if they got the dates, then they didn't care about the rest. And they also gave up on large format cameras. So, basically, they were carrying these little Kodaks around or Leicas and so forth, and that's not the way to record inscriptions. It wasn't until a few decades ago that the idea came, among a number of people, that there ought to be a revival of what Maudslay had pioneered, to start the corpus again. And that's when Ian Graham came into the picture. There have been others too but Ian certainly is the one who's carried on the Maudslay tradition. And this really does make it possible to work with the inscriptions. Now the codices, the books, have all been published. So that's no problem. There are only four of those. So you don't have a big body of stuff to worry about. But the inscriptions are really important. And the whole late decipherment that has come in, as far as the historical nature of it goes, all depends upon this corpus. You couldn't do it without it. There are still, however, many Maya sites that have not yet been covered. It's a work that just takes forever. It gets no big kudos from the newspapers or the public or the magazines and so forth. But it's the basis of all our research.

Q: One part of it is if new sites are discovered -- in the '70's and '80's, weren't there a lot of sites discovered in the Petexbatún area and so forth, sites that had never been documented at all and that were risking being destroyed by looters, and if they weren't documented, they might never be recorded.

Michael Coe: There probably still are sites somewhere, that have inscriptions that nobody has yet seen, that will have to be put in a corpus. And in the last 40 or 50 years, many new sites have been discovered- whole areas of Ancient Maya political problems and wars and so forth- cities that Maudslay never knew about. And, of course, as these are discovered, they've got to be recorded. The big problem now is that you want to record those before the looters get to them. And even after the looters get to them, it's a problem to track down where all these sawed up pieces and fragments have gone to- well, all over the world, in many cases. Some sites have been more badly looted than others. But it's a continuing problem, even in the Petexbatún area where some of these new sites have been found, and recorded, they--.

<crew talk>

Michael Coe: On date, do you know when the Corpus Project started?

Q: I don't have a date for that. I believe that it officially started in the '70's. I'm not sure.

Michael Coe: Because I played a part in this, setting this Corpus Project up. This was basically, originally my idea.

Q: Really?

Michael Coe: And I could tell you why.

Q: Okay. Let's do it again.

Michael Coe: About 40 years ago, a friend of mine, Stanton Catlin, who was then teaching at Yale, was connected with a foundation in New York, called the Guttman Foundation. And they told me, and he told me, that this foundation was interested in putting money in to "break the Maya code". They didn't use those words but they meant cracking the Maya hieroglyphic script problem. And my reaction was, well, that's great, it's wonderful, we need that, but we'll never get anywhere unless there's a real corpus, the kind of thing that Maudslay had started but Carnegie and the others never followed up on- and until that's done, we're not going to get anywhere with this.

So we had various meetings in New York and we put a committee together. Tania Proskouriakoff came, she was on that committee, and Floyd Lounsbury from Yale and myself and several others. And we thought about this and it came up, who could do this kind of thing? And everybody immediately said Ian Graham, this then young Englishman who had already done wonderful drawings of Maya relief sculptures in the jungle, was a real jungle person himself, knew how to explore and extremely good photographer -- Ian is the one to do this. So, this is how the Maya Corpus Project started. And then the question was, where should it be? Well, I voted on it being based at Harvard, because of the wonderful records that are at Harvard -- all the Carnegie notes and materials were there. Harvard was a pioneer in Maya Studies and this is where everything should be based -- not in New York or Washington or any other place. So that's how it came about.

Q: What did they accomplish? What did Ian accomplish? What did the people who worked with him -- Eric and David and Peter -- what did that group accomplish in the last 40 years?

Michael Coe: The Maya Corpus Project, this one that Ian Graham has headed for so many years, has put out a number of wonderful large format folios of specific Maya sites, site by site by site. For instance, Yaxchilan, which is a site that proved to be so important

for some of Tatiana Proskouriakoff's work on the historical nature of the inscriptions, we now have Yaxchilan *en toto* -- every single thing that we know that was ever carved at Yaxchilan is in -- beautifully published, by the Harvard Corpus Project, there. And we have a number of other sites. There's still a lot of sites to go, though; it's by no means finished. It's a work that will -- (LIGHT BURNS OUT)

<crew talk>

Cyrus Thomas

Q: Let's talk about Cyrus Thomas and Eduard Seler.

Michael Coe: One of the really sad things in the history of the decipherment is what happened to Cyrus Thomas. Cyrus Thomas was a very good American scholar, anthropologist and archaeologist who was a pioneer in the study of the mounds, the ancient Indian mounds out in the Midwestern part of the country, of the United States, and he was a pioneer not only in recording them but also in deciding that it was the American Indians, the native Americans, who had made these and not all sorts of strange migrants from Palestine or Wales or some other place.

Thomas got really interested in Maya hieroglyphic writing, he didn't have a lot-- he didn't have a corpus to work from; there were some inscriptions that had been molded, copied by means of moulds that he worked with and what not, and he had the codices to work with, the then three known ones, and he decided that basically Landa had something to say that was correct as far as the way the script worked, and he started to work on that, and he came up with a number of instances in the codices, in the books, where Landa's so-called alphabet actually did work, you know, as a syllabary, and he tentatively published on that. Well that was fine, he really did believe there was a phonetic side that it recorded language.

\On the other side of the Atlantic in Germany in Berlin was the formidable Dr. Eduard Seler, who was probably the greatest scholar of his day in the study of ancient Meso-American civilizations - Aztec, Maya and whatnot, he was a tremendous scholar. He published a lot of the Mexican books, the Mexican Codices -- they were not Maya but Aztec and Mixtec and so forth, wonderful commentaries, traveled extensively in central America, incredible memory, he was a great scholar. He decided to absolutely demolish Cyrus Thomas and the whole idea that there was any relation between Maya hieroglyphic writing and any Maya language and he amassed a vast quantity of data to sort of go against Thomas and really made him look like an idiot, and Thomas, he had already

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published several papers on this that we consider pioneering papers -- Thomas' last paper practically that he published, poor old Cyrus, was a recantation of his former belief that this writing system was recording the Maya language phonetically and it was a sort of a sad Mea Culpa at the end. He needn't have done this, if he hadn't have done this he'd be one of our saints today <laugh>, it was just a missed boat, a missed opportunity and it's the kind of thing that is to be repeated unfortunately later in the study of Maya hieroglyphic writing. It was one of the real obstacles to understanding how to really crack this code.

Q: At the end of the 19th century does it sort of reach a point where it's almost like people are sort of throwing up their hands about <unintelligible>?

Michael Coe: By the end of the 19th century a great deal was known about the Maya inscriptions and about the Maya codices, the only problem was that they knew a lot about it but they didn't know how to really read the non-calendrical material. The calendar had been pretty much worked out by that time by people like Förstemann, by Joseph T Goodman who was a real pioneer and who had been in contact with Maudslay and who worked on the long count, we could read the long count calendar, we could read the calendar round at that time, you could read Maya dates. There were still things to tweak there; we didn't understand why those Maya dates were put there unfortunately, nobody knew that, that was a mystery. There was a good study made by a German at this point [Paul Schellhas] which was only on the codices, but it told us which glyphs went with particular Maya gods. They couldn't read them of course, that's another story, but we certainly knew something about Maya iconography by that time which was very important.

What was not known was: what do you do with everything else on these inscriptions and in the codices that were not related to the dates? What about all those glyphs that followed the dates? Nobody could read those really, not even a glimmering and that was a real mystery. We'd come to an impasse, so people like Cyrus Thomas and Goodman himself sort of threw their hands up and said basically 'this is not a real script in the sense that Egyptian was, or Cuneiform in the old world, in Mesopotamia, nobody's every going to crack this script, it's basically too much of a hodgepodge and it just can't be done'. So it was stagnant, it was at a total impasse. We had Maudslay's wonderful corpus there but nobody knew what to do with it and it was going to take a long time before we did know what to do with it.

Sylvanus Morley and the Carnegie Projects

Q: Could we talk a bit about Morley and the Carnegie years. The Carnegie project starts up, lots get done in the Maya area, and Morley does do a lot of investigating and marching around and prints out these flyers offering rewards and so forth...

Michael Coe: Yeah that's absolutely correct. Sylvanus Morley was a person who unfortunately I never knew. When I decided to get into the field, Morley I think only had a year or two to live and I never did meet him, I wish I had. I've known a lot of people who did know him well, who worked for him, and they all universally looked on him as an absolutely marvelous, enthusiastic person who could really reach out to the public and tell how wonderful the Maya were, he really believed this.

He was just a total enthusiast, and he was the one who got the Carnegie Institution in Washington into the field of Maya research. He came up with a project that they could buy, and at first he was turned down by the Carnegie people -- but the then-head of the Carnegie Institution got kind of interested in the Maya, he knew nothing about it, and he asked Morley in to tell him a little bit more about this, even though, you know, "we're not giving you the money", and Morley held him spellbound for hours and at the end of that he signed the check, Carnegie began and it stayed in the field, they were 17 years at Chichen Itza for instance working away under Morley's direction. They explored all kinds of Maya sites that had never been seen before and Morley was right in there with his camera and so forth recording.

Now what did he record? He recorded only the dates, that was all he was interested in, especially the long count dates which will fix any particular inscription, at least according to him, that you could tie it into a calendrical date. Now J.T. Goodman among several other people had come up with a correlation between the long count-- a particular day of the long count -- and a day in our calendar, our Christian calendar or common era calendar as they say, so that was important to Morley, because if you could go into a site like Uaxactun which was unknown to Stevens, unknown to Maudslay, but basically discovered by Morley, number of inscriptions there, and [if] you could read those dates, you could date the sites, that was basically all he was interested in, and he actually put out what he called a corpus and it's nothing but a list of long count dates, with no glyphs to go with it. He did the inscriptions in the Petén for instance which I have in my library, it's a beautiful publication but it's not very useful if you want to see these inscriptions. The photographs aren't very good, the drawings are even worse - Morley really wasn't interested in that and all the other little things that are in an inscription, some of which we now know refer to the artist who actually carved the inscription and things like that, he had no interest whatsoever so he never put a corpus out really, what we call a corpus.

In many respects all those years of Morley were wasted. Now Morley initially, when he got into the field and into the study of hieroglyphic writing, he put out a handbook on this subject actually which isn't bad, that the Smithsonian published, he thought that if you ever did crack this and could read the non-calendrical glyphs they would refer to history, that the dates were about history. He later gave up on this idea, I suspect under the influence of the formidable Eric Thompson who was working for them, but at any rate Morley recanted and in all his later years, and in *The Ancient*-- his book on the ancient Maya, one of the really great popular books of all time on the field, he just tells you that there's no real history in these inscriptions. That's not what they're about, they're all about astronomy and hocus-pocus and god knows what, but they're certainly not talking about any kings or queens or princes or wars or anything of that sort, he just simply didn't believe it and that was it and what could you do? So it discouraged a lot of people from getting into this field of decipherment.

Eric Thompson

Q: Let's talk about Eric Thompson, his background and the influences on his life, and how he came to work for Morley, and he worked in ethnography with Jacinto Cunil...

Michael Coe: ...what's that? ...

Q: ...worked in Socotz with Jacinto Cunil...

Michael Coe: Jacinto Cunil, yeah, that was when he was with the Field Museum of Natural History.

Q: How he got into hieroglyphics, what he really contributed there...

Michael Coe: That's going to take a while, okay –

Eric Thompson was somebody who I knew well, I really did and I counted him as a friend, I really did, although on paper we weren't all that friendly <laugh>. However away from all of these things we were friends, we were like in many respects I suppose like two lawyers on different sides of a case that's being tried in a court who-- the prosecutor and the defense attorney and they look like they're at each other's throats but once they leave the courtroom they're friends. I was that way with Eric and I counted Eric as a friend, we had a very friendly correspondence and he gave me a lot of help in my early career. He had a very good side, he also had another side to him too when he got behind the typewriter, and he had a very negative side when it came to the total

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problem of deciphering Maya hieroglyphic writing. Eric got into the field as a young man; he'd gone to Cambridge University, he was in the trenches in the First World War at a very young age, went through that, went to Cambridge got a degree in anthropology although he had very little interest in anthropology-- social anthropology per se, and didn't use it terribly much in his own work. He initially went to work for Carnegie practically as a peon, he'd written Morley when he knew that Morley was at Chichen Itza and Morley was impressed by the fact that Thompson already knew how to work out Maya dates, and that was it for Morley, and Morley was an impulse buyer. He immediately hired him. Morley hired some of the great people in the field who had no background whatsoever, he just liked them and they turned out to be wonderful archeologists but Eric all ready had a pretty good background; he'd done a lot of study.

So he went to work at Chichen Itza, which is not the world's greatest place for inscriptions because there aren't many inscriptions at Chichen Itza, reconstructing monuments and doing stuff like that. Eventually he landed a job as a British immigrant with the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago and that was an important step for him because that gave him the time, being a curator, he didn't have to teach, he never taught in his life basically, I mean he wasn't a teacher, he didn't care about students and about teaching but he could-- as a curator it gave him plenty of time to do field research and he did some important archaeological work then, excavating in what was then British Honduras, it's now Belize, he went up to the border with the Peten, with Guatemala, at a site called Benque Viejo, and it's near an Indian village, a Maya Indian village called Socotz which is still there, the people in Socotz Yucatec speaking Maya and I knew some of these people.

While he was working at Benque Viejo in archaeology his principal foreman and sidekick -- and became close friend and even advisor and influence on his life -- was a Maya named Jacinto Cunil who I knew much, much later when I first went to British Honduras as an undergraduate and worked with him one summer. Cunil was a tremendous influence on Thompson because Thompson was a basically religious person, deeply, deeply religious - a high, high church Anglican and this kind of sloughed over into his view of the Maya and he looked on Cunil who's a very nice guy - very quiet and persuasive but also deeply, deeply into Maya religion and to all kinds of Maya customs.... Cunil became his principal informant ethnologically on the Maya, it was his window into the living Maya, and it influenced his view of the ancient --- that they were all peaceful people, who could reconcile their differences and live with each other.

Now this isn't the way that Socotz actually works, like any community in the world there are people who like each other and people who are at each other's throats but that's not in

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Eric's books, it's nothing but the peaceful calm sort of Apollonian ideal Maya that he had in mind, and all his books reflect the influence of Jacinto on this... he was a wonderful man but I suspect he was a little stranger than Eric thought. But Eric did very good ethnological work in there actually and archeological and then he could pursue his interest in hieroglyphic writing. Then he was hired again -- at a higher level now -- by Morley and by Carnegie, and he spent the rest of his active life before his retirement at Carnegie, decades and decades and decades, and all his work during that time was really under Morley's say-so, but he was a loner, he often worked by himself and he had a house in Harvard Massachusetts, to the west of Cambridge and he did all his work there. He very seldom ever came into Carnegie headquarters which was right in Harvard at 10 Frisbee Place, an old frame house next to the Peabody Museum there, you very seldom saw him there and as an undergraduate I started -- once I got interested in this field back in 1947 and '48 I wrote to him, you know, asking his advice and what to do, and he was very kind, he was very good with young people. He wasn't so great when you were a graduate student because <laugh> you knew a little too much as far as he was concerned, but he could be very helpful. One thing about Eric is that people think that because he had completely the wrong idea about the nature of Maya hieroglyphic writing and held its ultimate decipherment back, he never made any real advances in this field, and that's not true. I mean Eric for instance corrected and -- established once and forever and corrected by a couple of days, Goodman's initial correlation between the Maya Calendar and the Christian one, that was a very important thing. Subjects of Maya astronomy, Eric was really good, and Maya Calendrics. Eric was the first person to see that besides the long count dates the other dates on a Maya monument were really important; they told you to count forward into the future or to count backwards into the past and while he never read them he found the hieroglyphics for that which was terribly important. On the whole subject of the lunar inscriptions having to do with the eclipses, Eric did very important work there and he really did show the way in a lot of respects but he held it back at the same time because he was absolutely convinced that there was no tie in between Maya as a language and Maya as a writing system. He had no idea that there were other writing systems in the world that operated-- that might have operated along the same principles and that they could be-- the knowledge of those systems could be used comparatively to find out how Maya worked so he resisted this from the very beginning, this whole idea.

He thought-- I think because of his tie in and his early friendship with Cunil -- that the Maya weren't like anybody else, you know. that they basically were these peaceful, god loving, god worshipping people that he really admired and not like anybody else in the world, who were not all that peaceful and who were interested in history, he thought the Maya had no interest in their own history and refused to see this. But in certain respects he was wonderful. For instance, he really was very good on ethnohistory, that is the

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documents that the Spaniards, the missionaries and the Conquistadors and so forth had compiled on the Maya. When he dealt with those and tried to analyze what the Maya were like on the eve of the conquest, he wrote very, very good stuff. But there was one curious lapse in Eric which I've never really understood - one of the first things that I wrote to him about when I was an undergraduate was the Popol Vuh, the-- this great sacred epic of the Ki'che' Maya people which had just been published in a wonderful translation by a Guatemalan scholar named Adrián Recinos, -- really I was fascinated with this myth of these hero twins and the creation and whatnot, and I wrote to him about it and he wrote me a nice letter back, it's somewhere in my archives about it, and yet he never used the Popol Vuh as any kind of clue to the Maya inscriptions or to Maya iconography, now we know that it's tremendously important and in fact one Swiss scholar living in Guatemala who wrote extensively on the Popol Vuh, he did nothing but laugh at him for telling us that the Popol Vuh had the secret to everything -- this is what we should be doing. It's a complete blank in Eric, and when Eric dug his feet in about something you couldn't move him, I mean when -- he was like the Pope, *Ex Cathedra*, if he said something, that was it and he was wrong on so many big, big subjects; he was wrong on the Olmec, he wanted the Olmec to be post classic and he was only off by two thousand years there, the whole language started two thousand years before he said they did, totally wrong in that he finally gave up on that in his later life. He was wrong on the nature of Maya hieroglyphic writing, he was wrong that there was no history in them, he was proved completely wrong on some major subjects but a lot of other things he was absolutely right. So you don't want to throw Eric completely out of the equation, he was a formidable guy and a formidable scholar, he was like Seler, he made great, great advances but he also threw some roadblocks in to us.

Q: <crew talk> Coming to this view that, you know, the Maya were people who dealt with nothing but time...

Michael Coe: Yeah.

Q: ...with empty ceremonial centers that they would just come into for calendrical festivals and so on..

Michael Coe: Yeah.

Q: Can we talk about some of the motivations for that, I mean you know was there a desire after the First World War to sort of imagine that the people that were...

Michael Coe: That's a good point - yeah, yeah.

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Q: ...given what they knew, given that everything you could read was about the calendars and these long dates, in fact on the monuments sometimes 80% of the glyphs on there were calendric. And in the excavations of the cities they hadn't really found the residential areas --

Michael Coe: Yeah, they concentrated on the core.

Q: <inaudible> Could we talk a little about what Eric had to work with and what led him to the _____ you know what sort of made him want to come to <crew talk>.

Michael Coe: Anybody like Eric who had actually been in the trenches, had been through trench warfare in the First World War never really wanted to hear anything but peace after that. There's no question that there was a revulsion about what had happened in the world to end up with this horrific state of affairs that was the First World War and especially the trench warfare of the last three or four years of the First World War in Europe where Eric was and so he was-- had a mindset that was looking for a peaceful people. I mean this was a kind of a Nirvana or an El Dorado or something that was ideal in his mind that he was always striving for and there was nobody like the Maya, I mean that was it, and of course no people in the world have ever lived in utter peace with everybody else, I mean even in theocratic organizations or countries-- cultures like Tibet, we know that there was warfare going on all the time, but Eric didn't see that, nor did Morley, nor did a lot of the Carnegie people and of course they were the dominant people in Carnegie and I think they took everybody else with them. Their view of a Maya city -- it wasn't really a city in the sense that we know of in the old world or modern life or pre-modern times, that it was almost empty, and there's no question that part of this view was due -- they were only interested in excavating in the center, the core of these sites where the great pyramids were, the great temples and where the monuments were - that's what Morley was after that was-- he was always talking about bringing home the bacon and the bacon was recording more dated inscriptions and they were all in the center of the site and not in the peripheries, so they never excavated the residential areas or only a few sort of younger graduate students working with him got interested in this and did it, so they had no idea of who really lived in these cities or how many people were there. Basically it was a nation of farmers that would come in at intervals, big calendrical intervals and for calendrical festivals and everything was dictated by the calendar and the inscriptions had nothing on them but these dates to tell them basically you know when to show up, to build this temple perhaps or to conduct this astronomical ceremony, so they never had any idea clearly of who ran the Maya area and was it under one polity -- (end of tape)

Q: -- all the imagery that accompanied the text on a Maya stone carving?

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Michael Coe: The idea that the Carnegie archeologists had, like Morley or Thompson when they were looking at a big Maya stela, was that these were all ritual activities going on, that – well, we now know that some of them were but not by a long shot all of them -- and that the figures on them were priests who were all dressed up in these feathers and everything and conducting these strange rituals of the -- initially at any rate they didn't even recognize the figures with long robes and slight bosoms as women, they had no idea, that was going to come later, so they thought that these were priests too, it was a sort of all-male society conducting this hocus pocus, and when they looked at these inscriptions they found, which is correct, that a lot of a particular stela was filled up the date, or perhaps several dates including the initial one, but you'd have this big long initial date and then -- which they could read because that had been done in the 19th century, we knew how to read those long count inscriptions -- and then were a lot of glyphs following it which were already recognized as lunar inscriptions, that is, whoever put those dates on was really concerned about the phase of the moon, where the moon was in its monthly cycle as it appeared every night, whether it was a new moon or a full moon or a quarter moon or what have you, and Thompson did a lot of work with this, also John Teeple, a professional chemist who-- he worked with a new – well, an amateur in the field -- they worked out what these lunar inscriptions were and the gods connected with it and that was a lot of the stuff on a particular monument, perhaps more than half, but then there was all this other stuff that followed it and that they had not any idea what it was. It must relate however they thought to whatever the ritual was that was going on there and it must relate to the calendrics, it's going to be astronomy or ritual regardless of what have you, it was not going to be history.

Q: So Thompson does end up spending a lot of time looking at the hieroglyphs, one thing he puts out is...

Michael Coe: ...the big one...

Q: ...well, he puts out *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*...

Michael Coe: Yeah 1950...

Q: ...let's talk about the impact that book had with all its erudition.

Michael Coe: Yeah all right. Well I should say something about what I consider the biggest roadblock of all, it was a blockbuster and it came out about 1950 a book on which Thompson had been working for all of-- basically all his life until then, which is called '*Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: an Introduction*' which Carnegie put out, a big fat volume and when this came out just as I was graduating from Harvard and I was swept up in the

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Korean War and like a lot of my generation we thought we were going to get out of Harvard and do what we wanted to do but Uncle Sam had different ideas and I ended up being stationed on the China coast on a tiny little off-shore island and I had a copy-- I took a copy of *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* with me, I thought gee this is something that I really-- look I'm going to have time out there to really do something and I did actually on this little rock and I read the entire thing in the one year that I was stationed on this little island called White Dog Island. <laugh> And I tried to learn everything in it and everybody who's ever had to read that whole book ends up totally mystified, what is this writing system all about? It's-- Thompson in it lays out the Maya calendar and goes into every last detail about this. Also astronomy and what he called astronomical cycles and so forth and then he has a whole section in there, sort of aids to decipherment. Well, I thought this is going to be the paydirt, I'm going to really learn, I'm going to be the one that's going to crack this Maya script if I really get this under my belt, and I was totally mystified by it because in that book Thompson tries to convince us that there isn't any system here at all other than the dates and other than the astronomy, that basically it's kind of a mystic exercise on the part of the Maya for getting in touch with their gods the way Jacinto Cunil would burn incense in front of a Maya mound or down in a Maya cave, look at his divination crystals, which he did, and get in touch with his particular Maya gods, that was it as far as Thompson was concerned. It absolutely cowed people because in the front of every single chapter Thompson had a very erudite quotation from the poet Spencer or from Tennyson or -- I mean basically archeologists are a bunch of illiterates, and they were terrified by this because Thompson knew all this stuff, you know, he'd read all of Trollope's novels and he could tell you about Mrs. Prouty and so forth, nobody knew-- who's Mrs. Prouty? you know, they wouldn't know who -- he absolutely has the field cowed and everybody was terrified of him because he could blast you in print if he didn't agree with what you've said. He had enormous disrespect for linguists. The linguists by this time had the idea that if Thompson would just shut up or were out of the way or would pass on to his ancestors then they'd get to work and decipher this once and for all, because they knew something about writing systems around the world and they knew that you had to be a linguist or at least have a linguistic point of view to crack them and Thompson would have nothing to do with it, he got some sour reviews from the linguistics actually that infuriated him, absolutely, about this book, but Thompson kept on in doing what he did, and he had-- while he was working on this book he had started to make a catalogue of every known instance of every Maya hieroglyph in every single source whether it was an inscription or whether it was in one of the Maya codices or books and it was an enormous job; he put them all in what he called 'his grey cards' and he would go write down on everyone of those glyphs-- he'd have the glyph there and every instance of it he'd have it cut out and some kind of a copy and then where was it and so forth and out of this came Thompson's hieroglyphic

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catalogue, what we now call 'T-numbers', in which he classified all of the hieroglyphics into main signs on the one side and into affixes on the other. Well now if you look at a typical Maya hieroglyph block and it's got a big main sign and it's got all this kind of stuff added on to it, around it, those to Thompson were affixes and the main sign was were the kind of meat of the thing, it was like a sandwich, I mean, on the outside was the bread on the inside was the meat and the meat were the main signs. So he had all the main signs that he said are in there and then he had-- before that he listed all the affixes, and that was his catalogue. Unfortunately the catalogue is based on a total misunderstanding of how the Maya hieroglyphic script works. He never recognized that these were logophonetic hieroglyphics that these were concatenations that had both phonetic and logographic meaning, to him it was all logographic with possibly a few little phonetic hints here and there, but not much, not enough to express a language and if you don't know what the system is, you can't make a proper catalogue - people still use it but reluctantly and most professional hieroglyphic people, epigraphers today who work on it, try to not use the Thompson numbers because they're simply confusing and-- but it was an enormous piece of work and impressive but I don't think it will have any staying power - it's not part of the whole picture.

Hermann Beyer

Q: <having a break - crew talk> This was a good place to <coughing> about the beginning of the idea of structural analysis...

Michael Coe: I never knew Beyer but I can tell it.

Hermann Beyer was a German national who worked kind of on and off for both Carnegie and for Tulane, for the Middle American Research Institute in New Orleans, and Beyer was another pioneer in a very interesting line of research that turned out to have a real pay-off for the decipherment, and that was what he did with the non-calendrical inscriptions. He got interested in Chichen Itza; he'd been with Morley at Chichen Itza, and Morley and the Carnegie people had made all kinds of rubbings of the Chichen Itza inscriptions, of the nunnery at Chichen Itza. There are inscriptions there but they're very difficult to deal with, and nobody could really read them terribly well except the dates, actually Thompson was the one who worked out how the dates could be read, but Beyer was not interested in the dates but in what went with them, and he saw that there were repetitions coming up, a kind of a patterning that nobody had talked about before and the only way that he could see these repetitions of glyphs that came up as clusters was to, he thought, to take a scissors and cut up these irreplaceable rubbings of the inscriptions, but

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Morley hit the roof when he found this out, he really got furious, a great blow up, and Beyer had a short fuse also, so they had a huge row. But what Beyer did was to identify clusters that stuck together of these glyphs. Now one of these clusters we know can now be read as Kakupakal, who was a great-- early Maya leader, perhaps a king who had ruled at Chichen Itza. He was the first one to find this group of glyphs that actually spelled out this guy's name. Now he didn't spell it out himself because I don't think he believed the Landa alphabet had any great use at this point, the so called alphabet because nobody did, but on the other hand he showed that there was these structural repetitions that were in there and once you've got this kind of stuff, something's going on there that if you have the right point of view you can follow up on. So he showed that this wasn't just a random bunch of symbols that was stuck in there with these dates on these Chichen Itza inscriptions but something that probably had some kind of a real meaning, a pattern meaning, and he was the first person to do this. It's kind of sad what happened to him at the end because the Second World War comes on and of course Beyer is a German citizen and an enemy alien and apparently he ended up in one of our concentration camps somewhere in the United States and died rather miserably there, the poor man, but he had done a lot of great work. He was a very good iconographer, but he worked mainly with Mexican, although he wrote something on Maya gods too, but on this subject of first seeing the structure that was there in some of the non-calendrical inscriptions he made the first step forward and we recognize that now as a real predecessor, a precursor.

Yuri Knorosov

Q: <crew talk> Let's begin to talk about Knorosov and his early years that led him to the Maya. and his story.

Michael Coe: The least likely person one would ever have thought to have made the greatest of all breakthroughs in the Maya decipherment was a Soviet citizen, Yuri Valentinovich Knorosov, who was born in the Ukraine of Russian parents, spent most of his youthful years once he got beyond adolescence in the Russian Army. He was a Russian officer finally, he was an artillery spotter for the Red Army in the final assault on Germany from the east and he entered Berlin during the fall of Berlin, I mean horrific battles, survived, and in the ruins-- this is the story he told me once although I've heard different stories -- in the ruins of the National Library in Berlin -- he found a book lying there that had survived the fires and all the rest of it that he picked up, which was a very good black and white reproduction of the three then known codices: the Dresden, the Madrid Codex and the one in Paris, that had been done by the Villacortes, father and son, very good pair of scholars, in Guatemala back in the 1930s. It's still a useful edition to

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have, actually, a very accurate copy they made using pen and ink, and he was-- he'd already had a background in languages, he was a good linguist, I'm talking of Knorosov here, and he was interested in writing systems. After the war he went back to finish his studies at the University of Moscow and at this point in the last stages of the war the-- one of the great German scholars Paul Schellhas who was the first person to actually line up the glyphs that went with each of the gods shown in the codices, Schellhas had written an article which he'd published about the state of Maya hieroglyphic decipherment in which he concluded that there would never be a decipherment. Basically this is an indecipherable script, it was impossible, people had tried for decades almost a hundred years and had gotten basically nowhere beyond the calendar that it wasn't a real system, it could never be cracked. Knorosov mentioned this to his thesis advisor (Knorosov incidentally ended up writing his thesis on Bishop Diego De Landa) and his thesis advisor, who was himself a linguist and philologist, said 'look, if humans have made something, humans can solve it and if humans have put a problem down, humans can solve the problem, so go ahead and do it' and Knorosov believed him and went to work on Landa's so called 'ABC', the pages in Landa that tell-- he tells onemini-conare how they actually wrote what they had to say, and of course we now know that this was a syllabary. Knorosov was the first person to realize that this was a real syllabary and he went to work on that, and he took the Dresden Codex, certain pages in the Dresden Codex that shows a young goddess who we know is the moon goddess in some kind of relationship with other gods or other -- or with animals such as certain kinds of birds, and he went through systematically and above each of these goddesses, pictures of the goddesses and whoever they're with whether a bird or an animal, are usually four hieroglyphics with a -- can be fixed in the 260 day system, a certain date, and it's obviously some kind of a ritual or something that has to be done or an omen more likely on that particular day. What Knorosov showed was that some of the glyphs that are in there can be recognized in Landa's so called ABC and he applied those glyphs and using a dictionary of the Yucatec Maya language he was able to read it phonetically as a syllabary.

He published his findings in a Soviet journal called *Sovyetska Ethnographica*, Soviet Ethnography, in 1952, and of course the Soviet propaganda apparatus jumped on this and said 'look, here's somebody who's managed to defeat the capitalist world, has, inspired by the wonders of Marxism-Leninism, this young scholar has done what none of the imperialist scholars in Britain or the United States or Germany could ever do, he's shown how the Maya wrote.'

Well of course this raised, I say, a red flag, right away on the other side of the Atlantic because now we're in the Cold War, and Thompson was told about this and immediately

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jumped to the offensive. Thompson, a lifelong anti-communist and rather a right-wing Tory in all his feelings about the Soviets, decided that this was a total fraud and that the world should be straightened out about this and he started to write anti-Knorosov articles on this subject. It turns out that of course in retrospect Thompson again was a hundred percent wrong and Knorosov was a hundred percent right. Knorosov's really great contributions were first of all to recognize the value of the Landa-- we now call it the syllabary, as he said to me once that 'every single sign that Landa says, had that sound' now of course the sound is what Landa's-- Landa would have wanted to put in the Spanish alphabet like the sound 'ch' comes from *ah-che* which is the sound for 'h' and there's a letter 'h' in the Landa alphabet so called, but we now know that it's 'ch' from the sound *ah-che* as Landa pronounced it to his Maya informant, the Maya informant had '*ah-che, ch*, "ure we have a sign for 'ch', here it is". Knorosov recognized this right away, secondly Knorosov recognized how the whole system worked, that the non-calendrical Maya hieroglyphics, that it was a logographic or logophonetic system like Chinese, like Cuneiform, like Egyptian, and he knew all of these quite well because he had the comparative approach, he said 'this is another system just like that, that they had a syllabary in which they could have written anything and they used it a lot, especially in the codices, but they also had these logographs and he didn't do so well with the logographs actually. A lot of his so-called decipherments of those have not held up in later dates but he was right about the system. The system is you have often a in a particular glyph block, you've got the logograph which gives you the meaning, it's a whole word sign and then the phonetic part of it is added to it to kind of jog your memory, but okay, here's, let's say, the word for jaguar, which is *balam*, so they'll show a jaguar's head and then they'll kick in a phonetic from the syllabic system of 'ba' or a 'la' or a 'ma' to give you, somewhere the sound *balam* to tell you, okay, it's a-- it's some kind of a cat, a jungle cat, but there's four kinds of jungle cats, but on the other hand they want to tell you that it's only one jungle cat here that we're talking about, we're talking about a jaguar, which is a *balam*, so they stick in the phonetic. He found that system, it was Knorosov who told us how it worked and that's what really broke everything.

Now Thompson didn't buy this for one bit because he never thought that there was a system, he thought the whole thing was a hodgepodge, a concatenation or accumulation of a lot of kind of stabs, attempts at a kind of writing, but these people weren't up to what the Egyptians were up to, they weren't up to what the Chinese were up to, they weren't up to what the Sumerians in Mesopotamia were up to, they just didn't catch on and they just had this strange religious Jacinto-Cunil-like gobbledygook in which they got in touch with their god through their glyphs, I mean he was quite clear about that, it wasn't a real system and it couldn't be broken. Knorosov showed him that we could do it and he paved the way for everything we've done since.

Tania Proskouriakoff

Q: Let's <crew talk> in your background <inaudible>

Michael Coe: Okay, one of the giants in the field was certainly Tatiana Proskouriakoff - we'll call her Tania now <laugh> because I always called her Tania and I knew her very, very well and still have enormous respect for this person. She was born into a family of Russian intelligentsia, people who had been army officers, school teachers, priests, the whole class of Russians that very seldom get talked about. She was born in Siberia because the Proskouriakoffs had been involved in a conspiracy against Peter the Great and had to-- and got exiled to Siberia and this was where she was born, but from a very, you know, upper middle class family, very well educated and Tania wrote a beautiful Russian hand -- a pre-revolutionary one, and she came as a girl with her sister and her parents to Philadelphia during the First World War because her father was a procurement officer for the Russian Imperial Army, that was of course fighting the Kaiser on the Kaiser's eastern front and Philadelphia was a place where armaments and locomotives and things like that were produced. Well, the revolution came and Tania was-- and her family were cut off, they couldn't go back, didn't want to go back so what to do? And they didn't have all that much money at this point because you know all their money was back there in Russia so they were true exiles.

But Tania was young enough to learn English perfectly, she never spoke it with anything other than a nice Pennsylvania accent although she spoke fluent old fashioned Russian. She was always interested in art as an artist; she went to Pennsylvania State University, to Penn State, but really was always interested in the arts but she had a lot of interest in literature and things like that, she could write well. Then of course the depression came when she graduated, really the family was in a very poor way; she had no real job ahead of her and she wandered into the museum, of the University of Pennsylvania, the university museum, and saw that there was an advertisement for an artist, an advertisement that Linton Satterthwaite the great Maya archaeologist there had put up for an artist to go and do drawings or reconstructions and so forth of the ruins at Piedras Negras, a very important site on the Usumacinta River, the so called river of ruins that divides Mexico and Guatemala, it's on the Guatemalan side of the river, a major, major classic Maya site and Tania began really her work there in the field as an artist - she was hired as an artist, and she started to do reconstructions of what it would have looked liked in the past, very careful pencil drawings and then water colors. She was so good that Satterthwaite recommended her to Morley but really Morley needed somebody who was that good, the Carnegie Institution of Washington -- so she went to Carnegie with Morley

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and she had a good job and she stayed with Carnegie all her life, she was the last employee - archaeological employee of the Carnegie Institution of Washington even long after it had left the field of archeology. So Tania was famed by everybody for her reconstructions of what it might have looked like if you were flying over Piedras Negras and looking at it from an angle, what the great acropolis might have looked like. While she was doing these reconstructions of course she began to, on her own, probably even without Eric Thompson knowing, started to work on the inscriptions, that is she got interested in really what they were all about and the culmination of her interest in this, in the inscriptions came really after she had gone back to Piedras Negras as a subject of study, looking at the drawings and photographs of the stelae that were arranged in front of particular pyramids or in front of the acropolis at Piedras Negras and she had a mathematical mind, there's no question about it, she had a very, very astute mind, very logical one. She began to work out all the dates on groups of monuments, and basically in a nutshell what she found was that if you took, say, determined the earliest long count date on a particular monument—now remember there's usually more than one date on a Maya stela, particularly at Piedras Negras – there are other dates that are reached in the future, or usually in the past – if you took the earliest date that's talked about there, and then you go and find the latest date in a particular group of stelae, a bunch of them, what she called a series, in front of a particular pyramid, and subtract the earliest date from the last date, it's never more than the lifetime, or the possible lifetime, of a human being. It's never a hundred and fifty years, you know, and it's never two years, it's always a date that could be somebody's lifetime. And her hypothesis was that maybe these are talking about a particular ruler, that these are monuments, or important events, in the life of a particular ruler, this is a --- (end of tape)

Q: Go ahead.

Michael Coe: Tania did her undergraduate work at Penn State, Pennsylvania State University, and graduated in architecture. She was an artist/architect I think all her life, or architect/artist. When she graduated, the United States and the world was in the middle of the big depression or the first years of it, and there wasn't any job for any architect or for an architectural artist, simply nothing, and she happened to be in the University Museum in Philadelphia and she saw an ad up on a board I guess, I've heard various stories about this, put up there by Linton Satterthwaite who was the very distinguished, very good archeologist at the University Museum who had been working in the great Maya site at Piedras Negras which is a- basically a- one of the very important Maya cities on the Usamacinta River. The Usamacinta divides Guatemala from Mexico and it was on the Guatemala side of the border on the northern side- north bank of the river, so-called River of Ruins. Satterthwaite had a long-term project there and he

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needed somebody to reconstruct the architecture from a kind of a birds eye point of view, that is to look at the architecture, if you were floating over and looking down on the city, as it would have looked at its height let's say in the 8th century A.D., and Tania was the person to do this and she did these very, very fine reconstructions of the site first of all in pencil and then in watercolor. These are still used today and still cited by everybody and one has to remember that in one of these pictures that she did at Piedras Negras, there are these big pyramids around an acropolis and in front of each pyramid are a bunch of stelae and she got interested in the stelae and in the art of the stelae. She worked for Satterthwaite for several seasons and she was so good that Satterthwaite told Sylvanus Morley, who was looking for somebody like this, that the Carnegie ought to hire her and she was hired by Carnegie and she stayed with Carnegie all of her life really. She basically never even retired from Carnegie. Right to the day of her death she was a Carnegie employee. She was the last employee of Carnegie long after Carnegie had folded as a Maya research institution. She worked not so much in the Carnegie headquarters but in the Peabody Museum down in the basement. There's where she liked to work because she could smoke in the smoking room down there and Tania was a chain smoker without any question, always had a cigarette in her hand or in her mouth, and she began to work on the jades that had been fished out by an early archeologist at Chichen Itza by Edward Thompson, who had actually gone into the well and dived into the great sacred cenote or well and come up with all of these wonderful offerings including a huge number of jades that had been flung in there to the rain god or to somebody, and many of these were classic period, some of them were post classic, were later, and Tania did a study of those, one jade in which she found had obviously been made at Piedras Negras and had found its way north up to- up into the sacred well at Chichen Itza. At the same time she was getting more and more interested in the sculptural art of the Maya and the reliefs on the stelae and she had this logical mind. Everything had to be rational and logic with Tania. She was a pure rationalist. The emotional side of art didn't grip her at all, the gods that got Eric so excited never really spoke to her at all, but she was looking for a system in which to date Maya art and she went through all of the known published Maya stelae, reliefs, panels and so forth, to get a system where she could almost statistically show that any one particular monument belonged to such and such a period and she posited these periods of Maya art. By doing so she got interested in the dates on the monuments and she did some original research on calendrical dating and came up with some new stuff herself.

Then in the late 1950s on her own, working purely on her own, probably without even telling Eric Thompson what she was doing because she was sort of scared of Eric, that he'd criticize her, she respected him and liked him but she -- I think she was a little bit spooky about Thompson. She began to go back to her original love, the monuments of

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Piedras Negras, and to look at those stelae arranged in front of those pyramids and one particular group she would take a bunch of stelae here and she'd take the first one in a series and, say, the last one, and she'd look at the earliest date in- that was in any one of those monuments that are grouped, let's say six or seven or eight of them in a bunch in front of the pyramid, standing up there, they're stelae. She'd take the earliest date, a long count date, and then the latest one in that same series and she'd subtract the earliest one from the latest one using of course what we know about the Maya dating system and the correlation and so forth, and she found out that the span was never longer than a normal human lifetime. It was never 150 or 200 years, it was never two years at the other end of the scale. It was what you would expect an important person to live, that would be his life span. Her hypothesis then was that this wasn't all astronomical gobbledegook, that each one of these series is what she called them, these groups, were the life story of a particular ruler and this was an- a very interesting hypothesis, because this meant that each one of these groups was a different ruler, it was a dynasty she was dealing with. It was history for the first time, here, and so what she did was, next to go in and find out what are the glyphs that just follow the dates. And there is a glyph, a very special glyph we- which we now know is a verb and she couldn't read them phonetically because she really didn't get onto Knorosov right away, but she knew what they meant, and what she hypothesized was that the first one was a birth glyph -- to be born, "So and So was born on that date" -- and it would be followed by what was obviously his name and titles and then the next glyph might be "this is the date on which he acceded to the throne", he's being enthroned or seated on this day, and maybe the last in the series would be- or a later one would- might be a marriage date and then the last one might be a death date, but she really pinned down the birth date and the accession date.

I came up from-- I then had a job at the University of Tennessee, my first teaching job, and I came up to Harvard to get my PhD degree finally in 1959 and I went to see Tania down in the smoking room and there she was puffing away on her cigarette and she sort of nervously said, "Well, Mike, I sort of found some interesting stuff here. You might like to see what I've been doing." She laid it out, all the dates with all the sequences for each series and I looked at it <laughs> and my knees went weak. <laughs> I said, "Tania, you've done it. It's the most important discovery of all time that I've ever heard of by anybody, better than Copernicus. I mean, it's really something. You've hit it." And she said, "Well, I don't know. I haven't shown this to Eric yet. I don't know what he's going to say." I said, "Don't worry. You've got it. That's it. You've solved the problem. Just cut it. That's it." And she did. She published that in 1960. Eric had come over to her point of view finally and that was it. That just changed everything. We now know that we were dealing with history on these monuments.

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Q: I'd like you to make that distinction of what kind of intellectual approach she would bring to this, and also the story of I think when she finally went to Thompson one evening and showed it to him and he said this couldn't be right and he read it and the next morning—

Michael Coe: Came back the next morning and said it's right. Yeah.

Q: If you could tell that story. Let's keep going.

Michael Coe: What Tania had done with the hieroglyphs really did not reflect -- or was not concerned with the idea that this was a language, that the Mayas were speaking Maya here. The kind of logical work that she was doing was say a-phonetic and really had nothing to do with the sounds of the Maya language which is really what Knorosov was concerned with. They were working on two different problems here. Tania was working on the subject matter here, the subject matter is history, and the dates were all important to her and the glyphs that just followed those. She was interested in the meaning but she never proposed the sound. Actually, it was Knorosov who came up with the reading of one of these glyphs that followed the date which was *chucah* which means it was- he captured it or it was captured but that was Knorosov, he read it in the language correctly. She didn't care at this point. To her she had made the breakthrough on the basis of the patterning that she'd found here, very important. She called it *The Implication of a Pattern of Dates at Piedras Negras*, the typical Tania title. That side of the thing that Knorosov was interested in didn't interest her.

Beyer, however, much earlier than what Tania was doing or Knorosov back in the 1930s, his pattern approach to the non-calendrical glyphs was going to lead in to phoneticism. If he'd kept on going, if let's say the second world war had not caught this poor man up and trapped him, he- who knows? He may have gone one step further. I don't know, but certainly Tania wasn't initially interested in that at all. She stayed away from it and again I think she was afraid of Eric. As a matter of fact, when she had made her great discovery she went to Eric and tentatively told him about it and Eric said, "No, no, no. This just can't be the way it works. It's just absolutely impossible. There's no history here." And then <laughs> he came back the next morning and said, "Well, I took this back home with me" to Harvard, Mass, where he lived and he says, "You know, you're right." And which is amazing for somebody like that who had been a lifelong opponent of the idea that this was history. So Tania won that particular thing. Now, as far as the phoneticism goes and the linguistic side, once she had heard about Knorosov she was definitely interested in this and but this was a hidden side, hidden in the sense that she never let Eric know what she was up to.

<crew talk>

His own early involvement with study of the Maya and the Olmec

Michael Coe: Oh. <laughs> You want to aim to that. Okay. Well, I can talk about how I got into Maya. That's a different story.

Q: Yes, both, but just give some background to your getting involved in the hieroglyphs.

Michael Coe: All right. All right? I'd long been interested in the Maya, long before I became a Mayanist. I'd been reading about pre Colombian civilizations. I don't know whether I did that in high school. Certainly, when I first entered college I did it. I went to Harvard as an English major and that's what I was for my first two years there because I wanted to be a writer and it turned out that Harvard had no course there in creative writing which is what I wanted to do. Maybe they had one but I didn't discover it. But I was getting more and more interested in these Maya, and I read some junky books on the subject and I had the opportunity in the middle of my sophomore year, over Christmas vacation, to go to Yucatán and saw Chichen Itza and the scales fell from my eyes. I said this is great, this is just wonderful stuff, I want to- this is what I want to do.

So I went back to Harvard thinking that I could take a whole career in Maya archeology, that there'd be a major called that. Well, there wasn't any such major. <laughs> They told me I'd have to take anthropology and go over and see Dr. Tozzer in the Peabody Museum. Well, Alfred Marston Tozzer was the man who put out the great edition of Bishop Landa, he trained many, many of the great people in the field, like Morley for instance, the whole works. All of the great early archeologists were his students. He was the dominant man in the field really, a wonderful guy, and I'd never met him. When I went to see him in his office, here was this dapper, little man with sort of grizzled gray hair and a grizzled gray mustache and steel rimmed glasses and a three piece suit and the first thing he asked me, "What kind of grades do you get?" <laughs> And I told him that I'd never really gotten one above a C, <laughs> that's basically in English, and he said, "Well, I want to tell you something, that if you want to become a Maya archeologist you're going to have to get a PhD in this subject, otherwise you'll never be anything, and to do that you're going to have to come back in your junior year, take nothing but anthropology, learn something really about the Maya." And he made sure I did. He actually assigned me a tutor and he said, "You're going to have to get all A's with maybe a few B's here and there." Well, I'd never heard of such a thing, <laughs> that I'd actually have to work for the first time in my life, so I did. <laughs> This is what I did.

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What I did was to actually take all anthropology, and get all A's with a sprinkling of B's in the last two years, so that I could get into graduate school and I was accepted at the end of 1950 when I graduated. I did have the chance between my junior and senior years to actually go down to British Honduras and excavate in a small Maya site for the first time in my life. So I was getting to know something about the Maya without any question. Then I graduated, went to Europe for the first time in my life, thinking that oh, boy, I'm coming back to graduate school right away, I've been accepted and here I am going.

Then the Korean War came and I spent three years working for Uncle Sam, and this is when I went to the China coast and Taiwan and it took three years out of my life but I loved them actually. I had a wonderful time. <laughs> I came back -- decided I'm coming back to Harvard, I'm going to be a graduate student again, and at that point the Carnegie Institution of Washington, the archeological part of it, the Division of Historical Research they called it, was in an old frame building right next to the Peabody Museum so that as a graduate student, even as an undergraduate, I got to meet all these guys and also Tania at the same point. I knew all of the Carnegie people from Dr. A. V. Kidder, the grand old man by that time of American archeology, who had replaced Morley as the head of the division. He was wonderfully helpful. I got to know all of these people like Karl Ruppert and Eric Thompson and Edward Shook and Gus Stromsvik, the incredibly colorful character who was responsible for Copán, and just a host of these figures that had been just legends to me, I got to know personally.

So being a graduate student there was wonderful, it really was, and by this time Gordon Willey was my teacher. He had been hired by Harvard while I was in the Far East and he became the great American archeologist without any question, and he was a wonderful teacher. He knew nothing about the Maya originally. His field was Peru and the southeastern United States but he became the guy who you wanted to be with, and he had these wonderful seminars and they were the greatest of all seminars that anybody ever had. He wasn't a great undergraduate teacher, he was a terrible one, But those seminars were incredible, taught Socratic style. He might ask a few questions but you provided all the answers and we worked like mad for this guy <laughs> and one of the things he sent me on was the Pre-classic, what had happened before the Classic, and then I started to read about this and I got interested in the Olmec now- and he kept me going on this. He sent me on a project, write up the Olmec, so I wanted to put them in perspective.

Now by this time the Olmec had been discovered. They were the last great civilization of the world to get itself discovered, discovered in the 1930s and 1940s and early '50s by basically Matthew Stirling of the National Geographic and Smithsonian who had a

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number of expeditions in there where he found all these incredible stone monuments in southern Vera Cruz and neighboring Tabasco along the Gulf Coast in the very swampy region there, and one of these monuments that he found had a date that if you read it in the Maya long count system was already in the first century B.C., much earlier, hundreds of years earlier, than the earliest known Maya date, and he said that's a valid date and the Olmecs -- they had on the other side a kind of an Olmec face. So he said the Olmecs were early, earlier than the Maya, and in this he was joined by the Mexican archeologists Alfonso Caso and the great artist archeologist Miguel Covarrubias, and I began to read everything they'd written and what George Vaillant, another American archeologist who'd worked in Mexico had written, that said that they were early. Now this was totally countered by Eric Thompson. Eric didn't believe a word of this and he wrote this -- had written this long, long, incredibly detailed article to prove to his own satisfaction, and everybody else's he assumed, that the Olmec were late, that they- the Olmec were post classic. After the classic cities have declined, then you get these Olmec monuments with this spurious date that he said was a phony date. So I didn't believe him for one thing. I was already rebellious and while respecting Eric I realized that that particular emperor was missing a few clothes here and there. This is what got me on to Eric. So with the secret support of Tania who helped me, I showed that there were a whole bunch of early monuments with inscriptions on them outside the Maya area, to the west of the Maya area towards Veracruz including that one that Stirling had found at the site of Tres Zapotes that were pre Maya but good long count dates, and that the Maya calendar hadn't even been invented by the Maya but by other people living to the west and that they had received it late. Secondly, that the Olmec were early. I was convinced of this, that Stirling was absolutely right, Caso was right, Covarrubias was right, George Vaillant was right, against what Eric said, and I said someday I'm going to help prove that my hero, Matt Stirling, was right all along and that Eric was wrong and I think I did that.

<crew talk>

Q: Tell me a little bit about your experience with the Olmec.

Michael Coe: Now because of the influence that I'd received from my teacher and boss, Gordon Willey, and the kind of guidance he gave me and the encouragement from Matt Stirling also, I began to really be interested in what went on before the Maya in Mesoamerica, and particularly southeastern Mesoamerica, and began to look for really, really early village cultures down there, the first people who used pottery, the first people who made clay figures, the first people with real villages, the first really effective corn farmers who had really settled down, and I began a series of excavations on the Pacific coast of Guatemala right near the Mexican border in a place where nobody else would

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ever have wanted to dig because it was so hot, so away from all famous Maya monuments and pyramids and things like that that nobody would have looked at that a second time and basically what I found was the early formative there, the very first village life, full effective village life in Mesoamerica, and the pottery that went with it, absolutely beautiful pottery, wonderfully made, but really ancient. This is now -- Radiocarbon dating had come on by this time, had been invented, C14, and so we could get radiocarbon dates on all of this stuff. Actually, the first radiocarbon dates were just coming out on the Olmec now from the site of La Venta, that the University of California had gone and re-excavated and come up with charcoal that they could date and it turned out to be completely anti-Thompson, that La Venta had been founded, this great Olmec site in Tabasco, by at least 800 B.C. and was pretty much over by 400 or 300 B.C. I had been finding pre-Olmec stuff down on the Pacific coast of Guatemala but I always had in the back of my mind, someday I'm going to get into an Olmec site and dig the thing, and the one that I had my eye on was one that Stirling had found back in the 1940s that was right in the middle of what we call the Olmec Heartland along the Gulf Coast. It was right in the center of this Olmec Heartland. La Venta was off to one side and Tres Zapotes to another. This is right in the center on a great, big river system called the Coatzacoalcos, the largest river in Mexico in terms of volume, in this hot, wet area with lots of alluvial lands and what not. He had found some amazing colossal heads, these multi-ton, enormous heads, gigantic heads that we now know are portraits of kings -- but he hadn't really excavated this site properly. I said I'm going to find the origins of Olmec here if I go here, because it's right in the center in a really top place for agriculture. So I got an expedition together here, got money from the National Science Foundation, backing from the Mexican government, they gave me all the permission, thanks to Alfonso Caso who was determined that I was going to get in there and he was a wonderful man. So it took a long time but I finally got going and I had three field expeditions there with Richard Diehl as my co principal investigator, a wonderful team of Mexican graduate students and various other Americans who joined the project, and it was wonderful. We loved being there and we learned something about them and what we did was when we got the first radiocarbon dates on San Lorenzo we found out that it was earlier than La Venta, that in fact it went back as early as 1200 B.C. They were already carving these gigantic heads. So basically, what we had found was the earliest Olmec of all and did I find the origins of Olmec? No, because by -- when our first monuments start appearing at the bottom of the sequence they already know how to carve these huge things and move them. All their stone came from somewhere else, from 25, 30, 40 miles west, that they'd hauled in probably by the river system up onto the plateau. They knew how to move big monuments by this time. By 900 B.C., San Lorenzo is finished, it got destroyed, and then La Venta becomes the big site and then after that Tres Zapotes where Stirling's very early monument was found with a date on it, that comes in, and then by

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400 B.C. and later the Olmecs start petering out, and they are the origins of civilization in Mesoamerica. I think we established it and everything that anybody's found since about the Olmec has proved this. Now there are always somebody who says no. The wet blankets are there. They'll say no, you're wrong, that this is just a minor culture, that they were -- everybody in Mesoamerica was sharing this wonderful culture. This is completely wrong. This is the fountainhead of everything we know including the Maya. The Mayanists didn't like to hear about this one bit, I can really assure everybody, that nobody can be earlier than their beloved Maya, but there are earlier people. The Maya were wonderful. They were the greatest of all new world civilizations but they got their civilization from somebody else. Just as we get our civilization from Greece and Rome, they got it from the Olmec.

His personal relationship with Yuri Knorosov

Q: Let's talk about your relationship with Knorosov starting with that trip to Mexico in the mid '50s.

Michael Coe: My wife Sophie and I were married in 1955 in June and she of course had never been to -- down to Yucatán to the Maya ruins or seen those. So we honeymooned that summer in Wyoming where my family had been long established on a family ranch and then that fall we were back as fellow graduate students, by this time now at Harvard, and I suggested to her let's go over Christmas vacation down to Yucatán and see a lot of the Maya ruins. I knew how to get there, and we'd never been to Palenque. I had never been, and she'd never seen any Maya ruin. So she said yes, so we went down Christmas 1955, over that vacation from Harvard, and found ourselves in the same hotel as Tania Proskouriakoff, a wonderful, old-fashioned colonial style hotel in Mérida which is a lovely, lovely, quiet city, and so we saw a lot of Tania every day and had meals with her and what not and one day I was poking around in a secondhand book store in Mérida looking for things that nobody had seen before. I picked up my copy of the famous Motul Dictionary there which was published back in the 1930s in Mérida and very difficult to find, the -- one of the great Maya Spanish dictionaries, and I found this pamphlet in a sort of cheap, blue and white cover that was by Yuri Knorosov there, and it was in Spanish, and it was a Spanish translation of one of his early articles, probably the 1952 *Sovetskaya Etnografiia* article put out by the then illegal Communist party in Mexico under the guise of *Libreria Obrera*, the workers' bookstore.

So I bought this thing for just a few pesos and brought it back to the hotel and started to read it that night and of course I knew about Knorosov but I hadn't really read any of his

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original stuff and I was interested. It was intriguing. Was this guy a fraud, as Eric had said, or was he the real thing? And I read it and saw what he wrote about the Dresden and those pages in the Dresden that he could read at least partially using Landa's famous ABC, i.e., the syllabary, and I thought this is correct, this thing really makes sense, I don't see how you can counter this. So I showed it to Tania and she <laughs> was always nervous about things, she -- and she said, "Well, I--" she said, "loan it to me. I want to see it too." So she could have read the original Russian but she hadn't gotten a copy I guess and she read it and said, "Well," she said, "I don't know that he's right," this is what she always said, "but it's interesting and he's got something to say. I like the way he lays it out" and so forth. I think that's what got her hooked on Knorosov. She never could really I think bring herself to admit, at least in public, that Knorosov was 100% right and her friend and colleague there in Carnegie, Eric, was wrong.

So got back to Harvard and talked to Dave Kelley, who was then also a graduate student. We'd been undergraduates together when I got into anthropology but he was now a more senior graduate student than I was and he was totally sold on Knorosov. I knew of only three people in the United States or outside the Soviet Union at that time who basically thought that Knorosov was right and it was myself, Dave and down at Yale, I didn't know him at that time, Floyd Lounsbury whom I certainly got to know well later as a beloved colleague.

The other side was Eric of course <laughs> and all of his many, many sycophants and people who were afraid of him and so forth who said, "Oh, Knorosov is completely wrong," and some rather distinguished people were in that anti-Knorosov camp at that point, but people just weren't prepared to accept what he said partly perhaps for scientific, perhaps partly for political reasons. With Eric it was both. I had a correspondence with Eric about this. I tried to write him and say that I thought there was something in this and that it sounded to me like the system would work because by this time from my stay in the Far East where I was for three years, I'd studied Chinese out there, and I'd also studied Japanese at the same time. I thought this sounds like those systems, it's going to be a mixed system and I thought that he was on the right track.

Eric's answers were of course totally negative. He just wouldn't accept it at all. I think he thought that everybody was a little bit tinged with the color red who said anything nice about [Knorosov] at this point. He just wouldn't accept it and he made sour comments about the great god Karl Marx and-- I don't know. Frankly, I don't think that Knorosov cared two hoots about Karl Marx either, but of course he had to pay lip service being in the Soviet Union at this point. It could have cost him his life if he'd not done the right thing. So the great minds never came together on this <laughs> one at all. I simply

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couldn't have convinced Eric, he was not -- and he never -- until his dying day ever accepted anything that Knorosov ever said. However, he kept attacking him over and over and over again, which I don't think he ever would have done if he hadn't secretly known that Knorosov was right. He just <laughs> couldn't bring himself to admit it in public.

It took a long time for Mayanists to realize that this guy was correct. It wasn't until the Albany conference [1979] that a bunch of linguists got together with Mayanists, Dave Kelley and John Justeson and people like this, and it became quite clear that Knorosov had won the day and the publication that came out on that was the first kind of official recognition by people outside the Soviet Union that this was something.

But I was working also with the Olmec at this point and Mayanist stuff wasn't on my mind. I did a book based on San Lorenzo, my first seasons there, for the Smithsonian, a popular book called *America's First Civilization* -- I still think it was the first civilization! -- and they didn't pay me very much money for this book, <laughs> for the text, but I got a lot of money for my pictures, which really surprised me. I didn't realize photographers made that much money because archeologists don't make all that much when they write text. So I turned to my wife and I said, "Let's blow this money. Let's go to Russia." My wife was bilingual in Russian, the offspring of Russian parents who were in exile, the great biologist Dobzhansky was her father, and we decided to go.

This was in the sort of late '60s and it was under Brezhnev, the dark days of Russia, the days of stagnation, it was very Stalinist, and we went in the dead of winter with our two small boys. It was the weirdest trip we ever took in our lives and I have been on all seven continents, in all parts of the world. I have never gotten such a feeling of strangeness as -- being in Moscow in the snow, in the darkness, seeing Red Square and the great red stars on the Kremlin <laughs> -- as I received there, and it was total culture shock. <laughs> We were also worried because my father-in-law was a great enemy of Lysenko and we were worried about the -- I think we were watched the entire time we were there but the whole idea was eventually to go up to Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, which we did by night -- wonderful night train through the moonlit birch forests up to Leningrad to meet Knorosov.

Knorosov at this point, and until his last days, was ensconced on the second floor of the old Ethnographic Institute which had been set up by Peter the Great, which was right on the banks of the Neva River, this rather large blue and white baroque structure, and it's where Peter the Great stored his strange collection of oddities, like the stuffed body of his butler who was a giant, and things of this nature. <laughs> At any rate, there we were, and Knorosov had his own desk in a room that had five or six other people in it also with

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their desks, but he had the best desk, which was right by the window which was somewhat frosted up from the freezing cold, looking right out on the Neva River and all the ice piled up on the Neva, and there is where Knorosov made his great breakthrough, sitting there looking out at the spire of the Admiralty that Pushkin talks about, looking across the Neva River with the ice and everything, the last person on earth in the last possible place you would ever expect a breakthrough to be made but this wonderful man had the comparative approach and he was the one who did it.

He received us really very kindly. He spoke very little Spanish so my wife was the translator and he took to my wife right away. Everybody became great friends and we had many, many conversations and he took us all around Leningrad, his beloved old St. Petersburg. He turned out to be a world's expert on the history of St. Petersburg and of Catherine the Great and her Potemkin, her crooked sort of prime minister and lover, and he knew every square inch of it and he was fascinated, and he was such a wonderful guy. He carried our smallest child, Peter, who was only about 4 years old at this time, carried him in his arms all through the snows, all around Leningrad. He was a wonderful man. He looked like the Mad Russian. He looked like the mad monk, Rasputin, with the hair parted right down the middle and beetling eyebrows and blue -- sapphire blue eyes and chain smoking just like Tania Proskouriakoff but to me there -- this man was a genius, he was incredible. He had done something that nobody had ever been able to do. In over 100 years of research, nobody had done it and he'd done it sitting in that desk looking out over the Neva River at his beloved St. Petersburg. I call it a triumph of the spirit and I think it was.

Q: [Lets go back to when you got back to Harvard after first reading Knorosov in Mexico...]

Michael Coe: When I got back to Harvard, of course Dave Kelley was a graduate student. He'd been an undergraduate at Harvard too who I'd known well before I graduated and then I was in the Far East. Dave Kelley kept on as a graduate student and was more advanced than I was but a very, very interesting person and we saw a lot of each other at this point, and so Dave Kelley was an enthusiastic supporter of Knorosov and Floyd Lounsbury at Yale, the great linguist who I got to know much, much later when we became colleagues, I didn't know him then, but outside of us three I don't think there were probably anybody who would come out publicly and say yes, this man is right. Thompson had this great following of sycophants and friends and so forth who would kind of agree with anything that Thompson said and they just wouldn't accept it.

Now my wife, Sophie, was bilingual in Russian, could read and write it perfectly well, and so we thought that maybe we should set this correspondence up with Yuri Knorosov.

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Now in those days it wasn't easy to correspond with the Soviet Union. I think that our Central Intelligence Agency was reading everything that you sent out to the Soviet Union, reading all mail from our part, and certainly the KGB was reading it on the other side <laughs> so they must have had some rather strange reading when they read this correspondence. So I wrote to Knorosov and told him that I thought that he was on the right track and suggested that maybe Japanese with its mixture of logographic signs and syllabic signs would be a good model for this. I still think this, that Japanese is the closest in structure although we'll never connect them actually, to the way Maya works. And I got a wonderful correspondence set up with him and he sent us a lot of material at this point that you could only get in the Soviet Union, which then Sophie translated, and she went ahead and submitted one of her translations, of one of Knorosov's really key papers, to American Antiquity, which is a kind of house organ for all American archeologists, this is where you published at least in those days, and this came out and Thompson hit the roof. The idea that anybody could actually see what Knorosov was writing just infuriated him and he wrote this ridiculous rebuttal which is a perfectly awful paper trying to prove that everything that Knorosov did was wrong, and he just kept on in this line with snide remarks about Knorosov's Marxism-Leninism, and this and that and the other thing, semi sarcastic, and I don't think Knorosov really basically gave two hoots about Marxism and Leninism but that was -- that's the way Eric attacked him, this was Cold War tactics. So the fat was in the fire by this time.

Thompson knew that I was on the side of Knorosov but in spite of that fact we remained friends, we -- but every time he'd write me there'd be a little dig about Yuri V. Knorosov, the red hero there -- sitting there in Leningrad. He just wouldn't accept it but this is how this whole thing set up and eventually Tania suggested to Sophie that Knorosov's major work on the writing system of the Maya Indians which came out in Russian in a big, thick book, that this ought to be translated so that people could see the full thing, and Sophie translated it. Tania would come down and Tania was the editor. She came down and stayed with us during this translation process and that's how that got published, at least major portions of it, in English by Harvard. She got the Peabody Museum to actually put this thing out. So everybody by this time knew what was going on with Knorosov. By the mid 1970s, Thompson -- I think at the point where Thompson had just died, they decided to have a big conference in Albany at the State University of New York, SUNY, organized by people like John Justeson and Professor Campbell there and various linguists and all kinds of people were involved with this, who were in on this whole business, Dave Kelley and what not, young people like Barbara MacLeod showed up. It was a major conference. I invited Knorosov and he agreed to come but the Soviet authorities would never, ever let him out. As long as the Soviet Union lasted as an entity, he couldn't get out, he couldn't get out of this place, I suspect because they thought that

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he was going to reveal some method of dealing with codes or something of this sort. It was impossible. We all expected him to get there and Sophie was going to be his translator but he never got off the plane and even the state department had been informed that he was on his way and they were expecting him but it never happened, the poor man. So there he was in his particular prison while somebody like Thompson could go anywhere in the world. It wasn't really fair, it struck me, but that's the way the system worked. By the time of the Albany conference, the whole pendulum had swung to Knorosov's approach and from then on the linguistic, non calendrical side of the Maya hieroglyphs just rolled on from that.

Q: One of Thompson's arguments was if a phonetic decipherment was really correct—

Michael Coe: Yes. Yes. Then you would expect that the whole thing would just roll on.

Q: --a flood of decipherment—

Michael Coe: Yeah, there'd be this flood of decipherment.

Q: --in fact that didn't happen. If you can talk about that a little bit. We'll get to when the flood started in the '80s--

Michael Coe: Yeah. Right.

Q: Go ahead.

Michael Coe: Thompson had a -- sort of a two pronged attack on -- well, let's say three pronged attack on Knorosov, one on the basis of his politics, that is he would have been brainwashed by the Soviets into a totally Marxist, Leninist, anti-American, anti-imperial, anti-Western, so that was Thompson's take on it right from the beginning. The second one was attacking him on details. For instance, Knorosov made one iconographic mistake in one of his articles that identified a deer -- what is quite clearly a deer -- as a jaguar, and Thompson said "well, maybe that's a Marxist-Leninist jaguar but it's not one of ours, it's a deer." Yeah. He went into the details like this and then of course he had his gray cards so he could pick out all kinds of what he claimed to be mis-readings of this, that and the other thing. We now know that that's all spurious.

The third prong of this triple pronged attack was more serious in that his criticism was that if, as he claimed Knorosov had stated, that this was a totally phonetic system, then why is it that the whole thing hadn't been deciphered in the space of a few months or a few years instead of only partially deciphered and then by fits and starts, and he had

deliberately misinterpreted and misread Knorosov's statements, that this-- Knorosov never said that this was a totally phonetic system. He only said it was a mixed system like Egyptian, like Chinese, like cuneiform, and that there are logographic signs and that there are phonetic signs and that it's a mixture of these two, and he said, "Yes, I can read the phonetic signs but I can't necessarily read the logographic ones and that you've got to do them both together to really do this." Thompson absolutely misconstrued this and I think deliberately. He knew exactly what Yuri Valentinovich was saying, he just wouldn't admit it, and that's how he went about attacking him.

<crew talk>

His exhibition and book *The Maya Scribe and his World* and the discoveries in Maya iconography and epigraphy that followed

Q: -- '68, and August I guess it is, and—

Michael Coe: During the summer of 1968, one early August day I found myself with my wife, Sophie, and my children in Santo Domingo Pueblo, one of the Rio Grande pueblos in the general area of Santa Fe, in time for the annual corn dance which is really something, hundreds of participants dancing with these great drums going and singing, drumming up the rain clouds for this, it's really a spectacular ceremony, and two friends of mine were also there in the crowd watching this, Alfred Bush of Princeton and another old friend, Douglas Ewing who were both members of the Grolier Club in New York, which is a group of people dedicated to the collecting of books, talking about books, and they also publish their own catalogs of the shows they do, and what they suggested to me is wouldn't it be time to do a -- an exhibit on Maya books and Maya writing, and I said, "Since things are getting rather exciting, now that we can start reading some of this stuff for the first time, that is a good idea," I said, "but I will bet you that we will not be able to borrow any of the three codices, the Dresden which was then in East Germany under Soviet control, and Madrid and Paris, because these are so delicate they're simply not going to loan them," but I said if you want to do a show of this sort, I was convinced from what I knew that most Maya writing was actually not in the books or even on monuments but on pottery but nobody had ever done anything about this. Again, my friend, Eric Thompson had claimed that the writing on these vases was done by illiterate peasants who really knew nothing, that they were sort of imitating inscriptions that they'd seen real priests do on carving the monuments, and doing all this kind of stuff which is something again because of my rebellious nature I didn't believe.

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So I said well, yeah, let's see if we can get a whole lot of Maya vases, carved or painted, with inscriptions on them, and maybe there are people, private collectors, or public collections somewhere that have monuments that we could show -- at least to show what Maya hieroglyphic writing is in stone and that was it. So this kept in the back of my mind and eventually there was enough impetus, the Grolier Club agreed to do this. They have really not a very big exhibition space but enough to do something. So then I began asking around, who has these pots, these vases, and where can I find this stuff? And I got a lot of cooperation from museums and collectors. Even dealers would remember where this stuff had gone.

So I got a lot of it together all in one place, and at the same time I had been in Mexico City looking at a famous private collection of a very important Mexican citizen named Dr. Josue Saenz who was one of the major collectors of pre Colombian art in Mexico and he was there at dinner at his house and he said, "You know I have a codex." And I said -- Well, I'd seen hundreds and hundreds of copies of fake Maya codices, had been sent to me over the years, photographs and so forth, so I said, "Okay. Bring it out." I knew it was going to be a fake and I took a look at it, what he had, and I said, "I think this thing is real," the first one I had ever seen outside the three famous ones but I was willing to accept them but I got photocopies of it, brought it down to Yale and Floyd and -- Lounsbury and I went over it and we saw that it is in fact a Venus calendar, the last thing that a faker -- these fakers are pretty ignorant people -- were likely to know anything about. So I thought that maybe Saenz would loan this to us. Well, it turned out that he did.

So we got this codex which for some reason or another people decided to name the Grolier Codex because they didn't know what else to call it. It was very fragmentary but still amazing. We radiocarbon dated it and it turned out to be early post classic, the paper that it was written on, which is fine because it's in a Toltec Maya style that was current at the time at Chichen Itza and places like this. So then I borrowed all these vases and we mounted that show in about 24 hours in New York. I got them all to New York in the Grolier Club in the exhibits room and started to look at them.

Q: The point at which you got all these vases together and—

Michael Coe: Okay. All right. So we got all of these Maya vases and some Maya panels, small carved pieces with hieroglyphic writing on them, and the Grolier Codex, all in one place. We mounted that show in about 24 hours. It was really done at the last possible moment and I had to write all the labels at this time and I had to look at these vases very hard. I didn't really have time to look at the hieroglyphic inscriptions on them, on the painted glyphs, and of course Thompson had told us that they were

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meaningless anyway which as I -- I did not believe, but I looked at what was on the vases and I began to see that there were repeated kind of young lord figures on them, would show up twice. There'd be two of these young men, all gorgeous Maya jade jewelry and with what I call god markings on their bodies, so I knew that they were deities and not really real people, not meant to be living rulers or once dead rulers but rather gods.

So I thought, now, who are they? And they looked like twins to me, and twins rang a bell, because in the Popol Vuh, which Thompson had overlooked consistently, the Popol -- in the Popol Vuh myth, which is an origin myth, there is one period in which a set of twins -- well, two sets of twins -- The first set of twins are summoned into the underworld and they are gods too. I now realize it's a Maize God and his brother from later work that's been done on this. They are summoned to the underworld because they're playing a noisy game of ball on the surface of the earth and the underworld lords demand that they go down into the underworld and they undergo a whole series of trials in the underworld, a house of bats and a house of knives and things like that. They play a ball game against the lords of the underworld in which they are finally defeated and they are sacrificed.

The head of the principal brother there, of the first set of twins, is cut off by the underworld lords and hung up in a tree, and a young lady comes by who is the daughter of one of the lords of the underworld. All of these gods of the underworld, their names are the names of diseases that will kill you, so they're pretty bad people. This lovely young lady is walking under the tree and she sees the head hanging in this tree, which is said to be a calabash tree. We now realize that it's probably a cacao tree but she talks to the head and the head talks back to her. She holds up her hand and it spits into her hand. Naturally, she becomes pregnant, and after so many months she's thrown out of the underworld by her enraged parent and the other lords and she goes up into the house of the twins' mother and father, who are the old creator gods, and she eventually gives birth to the second set of twins and these are the hero twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque.

They also grow up. They're great blow gunners and what not. They go into the underworld and they trick the lords of the underworld, through a whole series of -- they're tricksters, through a whole series of tricks, and they survive the ball game but eventually they are temporarily killed but they come back to life and then they perform tricks and -- which end up with them cutting up with a knife the lords of the underworld and they rise up and are resurrected and they become the sun and the moon according to the Popol Vuh and rise up into the heavens. Before they rise up they resurrect the bones and body of their father -- with the head hanging in the tree -- who we now know is the Maize God.

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So it's a wonderful story, and I began seeing it on these vases, that there are not only probably hero twins there, but also the whole episode of them cutting up the lords of the underworld. I thought I could identify at least two of these gods as important underworld lords, and they are. The twin is hiding the knife behind his back and trying to pull him out of his snail shell in which he lives to cut him up, and I saw over and over again references to the Popol Vuh. So I got an idea that the Popol Vuh is a major source for the iconography of the classic Maya.

The show was on, everybody saw it, got a fair amount of publicity, and quite a lot of criticism, but so what? At the end of the show, of course, I was asked to write the catalog, and this took a couple of years. The show was in 1971 at the Grolier Club in New York, and the catalog didn't come out until about two years later. At this point, my family and I had a second home up in the little hill town in northwestern Massachusetts called Heath, way up in a sort of 1500 feet, an ancient farmhouse up there 200 years old and I had gotten photographs from Justin Kerr, who photographed that show. He had not yet invented his famous rollout camera, so he had to take multiple photographs of every one of these vases and then stitch them together so that you could see them laid out all together, and I also photographed the inscriptions in every Maya vase that had ever been illustrated by anybody, dug up ever. I did this on a Polaroid camera. I copied these out. First I put them on cards and then I Xeroxed them, and then I cut up the inscriptions. And I had a big sheet of graph paper and I began seeing that there were repetitions in the inscriptions on the tops of the vases or in primary positions going down, and then there were secondary inscriptions which were attached to the figures on the vases and the primary inscriptions around the top and the ones coming down the side, there were major ones, seemed to have nothing to do with what was going on on the pots but were the same everywhere. There was the same repetition, the same sign at the beginning and then the same second sign and third sign. There were variations in this, but essentially there was what I would call a primary standard sequence and this is what I called it in the catalog.

So I began to differentiate between this PSS or primary standard sequence and the secondary texts that were connected with what was going on, probably described what was going on. Now I couldn't read that PSS, that primary standard sequence, because it was so repetitive and so formulaic. I felt that it might be a chant, let's say like you find on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, to tell the dead person what's going to happen in the underworld. That was my hypothesis. It never got to the stage of a theory because it was shot down by some younger epigraphers before then. We now know what it is, but this is how I discovered this and I think I did it because I've always been able to see patterns. I think that's extremely important. I can't remember numbers, I can't remember dates, but

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I don't forget anything that I have ever seen. I'm just blessed with a -- I think -- I'm not boasting, a photographic memory and if I've seen it I just never forget it, it's in my brain somewhere. So I began seeing these patterns. I don't know how Thompson could have missed them. I mean, everybody missed them. They were there for everybody to see, but the problem was that they had was there weren't enough of these vases in the same place to really get a good handle on it. I had a big sample. There were a lot of Maya vases. Admittedly, they were all unprovenanced. We don't know where they came from. They were in public and private collections but it didn't matter because they all dated about the same, they were all late classic, most of them, and they all said the same thing.

If you had only dealt with archeological publications, and archeologists are very, very slow in getting their material if at all into print, then you wouldn't have had a big enough sample to do this. I think that held back that -- but again, people who don't like to look for patterns are not going to see them and I'm interested in regularities in culture. I like to study and discover things that are happening over and over again that we haven't seen before, and again I agree that the biggest archeological adventures take place in the mind, and this one took place in my mind.

Q: Could you talk about more specifically -- you talked about putting these things on cards and you went down to the Green River, and the swimming hole, and sorting through them while the kids were swimming.

Michael Coe: Yeah. Right. Dave Kelley came and visited us and—

Q: --Dave Kelley comes and visits—

Michael Coe: Yeah. Right. <laughs> He forgot his bathing suit there too.

Q: Go ahead.

Michael Coe: Well, I had really found this pattern by cutting up the Xeroxed copies I'd made of my cards, taking the relevant glyphs out and then lining them up. All the ones that started the sequence I'd line up in one column here, and then I'd go along and I'd do the next ones here in individual pots and take them across the whole chart, this big piece of graph paper that I had, and I -- then I began to see that this... this... this... are always there, no matter what happens in between, and what not, those glyphs are always there, and then at the end there were a whole lot of glyphs that by this time, thanks to Tania Proskouriakoff and others, we knew were personal names and titles, probably of the patron who paid for that particular pot to be painted or carved and in whose tomb it probably ended up, because all this stuff comes from tombs. I'd like to say right now that

we know that all these things are chocolate pots to hold chocolate but we didn't know that at the time.

Once I had discovered this, luckily Dave Kelley came to visit me and Dave had his old family place in New Hampshire not all that far away from Heath, Massachusetts, so he came over and I took him to our swimming hole on the Green River, which we had bought, this wonderful ice cold swimming hole, freezing cold water, and my kids just loved it. They'd play all day in this water which would freeze anybody else but I would stay in so long, maybe for 10 minutes, and then I started getting chilled so I'd get out and I had all my cards and my chart with me and I'd look at those. Well, Dave and I went over this stuff and he agreed. He said that's it, absolutely. It was wonderful, and I was so lucky to have him there at that time. He forgot his bathing suit with us before they went <laughs> back because he's forgetful but he didn't forget about the PSS.

Q: It's interesting. There's this theme going back and forth in Maya studies of sort of Kircherian ideas of things that are mystical symbols and in a way your notion about the PSS was Kircherian —

Michael Coe: Yeah. Yeah. <laughs> That's right. <laughs>

Q: Could you talk about that a little—

Michael Coe: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Right.

Q: --The notion that this is something mystical or religious, and it turns out to be something very practical.

Michael Coe: The ironic thing is that I had fallen into the same trap that Athanasius Kircher had fallen into in the 17th century and that Thompson fell into in the 20th century in thinking that this PSS was just a series of purely logographic symbols standing for important underworld gods and so forth and never dreaming that actually most of this stuff was purely phonetic as it turned out to be, but in a very pictorial fashion, very elaborate glyphs. It-- I had thought that this was some kind of a chant of the name, this god, that god and that god, that you're gonna see when you get into Xibalba, the underworld, and I even thought that one of those glyphs that I called Wing-Quincunx might well be Xibalba, hell, and it turned out not to be that at all. A younger generation of epigraphers set me and set the world right on that. It's purely phonetic but it's -- definitely exists. This was a very well-codified [formulaic phrase] and that led to some really big breakthroughs in the decipherment.

Working at Yale with Floyd Lounsbury

Q: At a certain point, I'm not quite sure what year, you arrived at Yale, you started teaching at Yale and Floyd Lounsbury was at Yale. When was that? Tell me a little bit about --getting to know Floyd and working-- What he was like and what it was like—

Michael Coe: Yeah. Right. I spent my first two years as a teacher at the University of Tennessee where I was quite isolated from the Maya, Mesoamerican world, although I luckily had a wonderful library that had been given to me by Karl Ruppert, one of the old-time Carnegie archeologists at Chichen Itza. That kind of saved the day for me because I really had a wonderful library. He gave me all the old Carnegie publications when I was still a student so I was lucky on that. One day a letter came from Yale that said they had an opening for me and to me this was ideal, <laughs> the chance to go there, because amongst its other attractions, other than getting back to New England where I really spent most of my life, was to be with Floyd Lounsbury and Floyd was one of the most intelligent people I have ever known in my life. He's one of the two real geniuses that I think that I've known in my life, genuinely- genuine geniuses on the order of Mozart or Einstein. <laughs> He was trained as a mathematician and wanted to be a mathematician and he always had a tremendous feeling for numbers, exactly what I didn't have. He had no feeling whatsoever for visual things though. I think I had that. I was the photographer and he was the computer and so in a way we <laughs> made a pretty good team here. We even wrote a paper together but I really came under Floyd's influence tremendously as anybody did who came near him.

He was a marvelous linguist and social anthropologist, as a linguist specializing in the Iroquoian languages, which are the most difficult ones in the world. Seneca and Iroquois and all of those are really hard languages. He not only knew them but he could teach the Native Americans back their own language, he was so good. He was a natural polyglot. He knew Spanish, he knew Portuguese, he was very good in Russian according to my wife so he could read Knorosov in the original and he was an enthusiast for Knorosov. From the very beginning he knew this was right. Floyd once told me that he'd always wanted to get into the Maya hieroglyphs but he'd gotten Thompson's big, huge book -- 1950 book -- and read it, and he just got so discouraged he thought he'd never be able to make his way out of that mess. Most linguists felt that way about it and he was one of them. Floyd had a totally logical mathematical mind and he was attracted to the Dresden Codex right away because of all the mathematics in it. He gave a course in the Dresden Codex to advanced graduate students and advanced undergraduates as well and I took it, I sat in on it. For I think three years I sat in on Floyd's Dresden Codex. I still have all the notes that I took in there and it was a -- it was just a tremendous eye opener. This is when I really got to know and learn and understand how a Mesoamerican Codex worked,

was all from Floyd, and because of Floyd -- he began to attract people from other places, graduate students who came in not just to learn what Floyd knew about kinship systems, and he was a world's authority on abstruse kinship systems or on Iroquoian linguistics but on the Maya and he made an enormous contribution. He was the mildest, nicest, most decent person anybody could possibly imagine. When you asked Floyd a question, he'd say -- he'd look up a little bit and he'd look out and you could see wheels were going around in his head like that, as a computer was going, and he'd come up with a solution all laid out perfectly. He wouldn't even start to speak until it was finished, what he had come to, and you knew that what he said was absolutely perfect because it was.

The first Mesa Redonda de Palenque in 1973

Q: I think we're ready to talk about the first Mesa Redonda and—

Michael Coe: What's the year now? I keep getting—

Q: 1973. I think Merle called you and you weren't available. They were gonna do it in July or something and you weren't available—

Michael Coe: She's got different stories about this but-- <laughs>

Q: I think you were the first person she called and—

Michael Coe: Yeah. Right. Well, Merle tells a long story about this, frequently, but -- so it was '73 and it was Christmas vacation, wasn't it?

Q: Right, and then April I think of '74 was the Dumbarton Oaks—

Michael Coe: Yeah. That was the only one that I ever went to. Both of those were the only ones...

Q: Let's talk about how that came about and how you went down there and the other people who were there and where it happened and what it was like.

Michael Coe: Yeah. All right. Okay. Sophie and I had visited Palenque several times going through with our family, with the children, in the years that the children were small, and of course I loved this place almost above all Maya sites as many people do, and had met Merle Greene Robertson and her husband who was-- They both were teachers and supervisors at a private school in California but they had spent -- were now spending much of their time in Palenque because Merle was an artist and she fell in love

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with Maya art and especially with Palenque and she began to draw the Maya reliefs at Palenque, the stuccos and the reliefs, and -- she was a very good photographer -- to photograph them, and of course she'd already been making rubbings of Maya reliefs off in the jungle.

Merle is a supreme jungle person. She loves the jungle and she knows how to move in it. She's an explorer like Maler or Maudslay, in this order, or even of John Lloyd Stephens or Catherwood. So she was really primed for Palenque when they bought a place there. In the early 1970s she contacted me, said that "Can't we get together and have a meeting about Palenque? Because there's a young artist and her husband who have come in to Palenque and they've been doing all sorts of drawings and work and plans and Linda Schele and her husband, David, and other people are interested in Palenque and I know that there are people that I've heard that are interested in working out the dynastic succession because this hadn't been done for Palenque and the art historians involved in this and dirt archeologists -- Can't we get something together?" And one of my graduate students -- then graduate students, David Joralemon, suggested to her that yeah, let's do it, he was then living in my house as a house sitter, let's do it, let's call it the Mesa Redonda de Palenque, a series of roundtables that had been given earlier in Mexico. So that sounded like a good idea. Then, because we could only get down at Christmas vacation because of my teaching schedule that year, she agreed to do it over Christmas holiday. So that's what we did and we all met there at that place, we happy few.

I've been to hundreds of meetings in my lifetime but without any question this was the greatest of all, this was it. This was the mother of all meetings. Even though there were only a handful of us there, every single person there at that meeting had something to contribute and something to say that nobody had ever heard of or even conceived of before. It was a fabulous meeting. Floyd was there. I had a group of my students from Yale including David Joralemon and Larry Bardawil, who was the first person to worry about the big bird sitting on top of the world crosses at Palenque and he wrote a fabulous paper on this. He didn't stay in the field unfortunately, now a famous proctologist, but you can't keep this person away from medicine when his family insisted on it and there were other students from other universities. Dave Kelley couldn't make this but Floyd was there and Betty Benson and this young student that we'd heard about came in from Calgary, Canada, who was the prime student of Dave Kelley who was teaching in Calgary. Dave couldn't make it but he sent Peter Mathews, this young Australian all covered with hair and mustachioed and somebody right out of this late '60s, early '70s, period showed up, <laughs> with a strange T-shirt that he had a Maya god on, and he wanted in. Well, who was he? And it turned out to be fabulous. He came in with this book that had all of the known dates in Palenque and what they went with -- or the glyphs

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that they went with that Dave Kelley had set him on. Floyd had already been working on Palenque here and Linda Schele was there.

There were two things that transpired there besides the regular talks. In the first place, I suggested to Merle that wouldn't it be nice to invite the people of Palenque in to hear this because nobody had ever bothered to tell, ever, people living around a Maya site or in it what was going on there, and these people are basically Chol Mayas, they're speaking a language related to the ancient language of the inscriptions, all of the guards there and the guides were Chol Mayas, invite them in too. So we invited them into it, especially the guides because they could understand English if it was in English, but not everything was in English. Then we had at the same time these three people who had been working on the inscriptions of Palenque and knew all the dates.

Q: Before we get to them, talk a little bit more about the guides being there—

Michael Coe: Now the guides there were Chol Mayas. They spoke Chol Maya, they spoke Spanish and they spoke English so they were wonderful people to invite in. In actuality, this was an idea that was put in my mind by Moises Morales who's not a Chol Maya, he comes from northern Mexico, who had been a former fighter pilot with the Mexican Air Force and came in with his family to Palenque as basically immigrants and fell in love with the place and stayed there, and Moises was the head guide. He was the head of all the guides, they were all under him, and he was a resident of Palenque, a incredibly bright guy who had learned Chol Maya, Yucatec Maya, as a foreign language naturally because he was not a Maya, had -- spoke fluent English, Spanish of course, French, German, so he could handle -- and God knows how many other languages. Any visitors that would come in to Palenque, he'd take them around. Jackie would come in to Palenque and Moises would squire [Kennedy] her around and what not, all sorts of-- He knew everybody and incredibly knowledgeable about Maya culture, even Lacondon Maya culture, of these wild, long-haired Mayas in robes who would come in to the site to sell their arrows. So Moises was a very important part of this program right from the very beginning, and so we had the guides there.

There was really nothing like this because we'd sit around and we'd discuss problems like, let's look at the Temple of the Cross, is this really up there on the right hand side as you walk in, or not? And we'd say, now let's go up and look. So okay, we'd all go out and wander out of Merle's little champa there, her open sided thatched area where we sat in, and we'd wander up into the site and take a good look and we'd come back with new ideas. We had the subject matter right there from the very beginning, so it was truly the Mesa Redonda de Palenque. Nobody'd ever done this, had a conference at a site like this where you could go out and check every last bit and Palenque was the place to do it.

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Well, after our regular sessions every day, the three dynastic people, Floyd, Peter Mathews and Linda, would go into kind of executive session with all of their charts and all the dates written down and everything. By before the conference ended, they had come up with a pretty complete dynastic history of Palenque, probably the first really long dynastic history that had real names of real people in it and it was an extraordinary thing.

<crew talk>

Q: Start talking about the last—

Michael Coe: All right. Was it the last day or the-- On one of the final days of the conference, it was sort of a rainy, nasty day as I remember, a bunch of us including Gillett Griffin, my friend from Princeton University who was a really important part of this conference, and I and some of my students decided to go and find the site of Tortuguero in Tabasco, which we'd never seen, that produced the really important inscriptions. So we went off on this long journey there and never really found the site unfortunately. When we got back –

Floyd and Peter Mathews and Linda Schele had at my suggestion been working together on what they had been working on separately on their own, and they had these charts and notations and notebooks and what not that had apparently the important dates and names of past kings, past rulers of Palenque. So I said to her, “Well, why don't you guys work on that while we're gone, get together? You people have all been doing these things separately. Now you're all here under one roof. This would be a good time to do it.” So they said, “Yeah. We'll do it.”

And when we got back from our complete fruitless trip to find Tortuguero, they'd spent the whole day on this and they had now sort of super charts laid out with what they thought would be the entire dynastic history of Palenque or most of it, and they really had for the very first time a Maya site that had a really long, complete history, because even at Piedras Negras Tania never got the entire thing and really the names are very hard to read there. Now the names that they put down for these kings were kind of nicknames, made-up nicknames that they had made up from what the glyphs looked like. There's a couple of these that still have nicknames stuck on them like Casper the Ghost, they've got a glyph for one of these kings that nobody has yet cracked that looks like Casper in the cartoon, but most of them they could have put such names and they did.

When we returned from that fruitless trip to Tortuguero, which we of course never found, which is true with many Maya sites, that you'd like to go and revisit and you can't find

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them, we got back and found that these three people really had done what I had suggested that they do, and they now had a really big chart that had the complete dynastic sequence with the dates and everything for the births and the deaths of all of these people as far as they could be determined. It was the first really long dynastic sequence, really long one, that we had for a complete Maya site because what Tania had done much, much earlier for Piedras Negras and for Yaxchilan, which was another one that she worked on the history of, were very short sequences, it wasn't really the whole thing. Now we had the whole thing, or most of it, and so you could place the man who was in the Temple of the Inscriptions in his context and on the chart, however, they were not reading the names at that point at least on the chart, they may have done it in their minds or verbally, and so that they had Lord Shield, for instance, just for the guy in the Temple of the Inscriptions because his main glyph, or so-called main sign, looks like a shield, it is a hand shield. We now know that this was Pakal which actually means shield in Maya.

They knew at this point that his son who was the principal guy commemorated in the Temple of the Cross, the Temple of the Foliated Inscriptions and the Temple of the Sun, they knew that that guy, the principal son, was named Kan Balam, this is what they called him, and this was suggested during the -- we knew this by the end of the conference. Moises, however, who was kind of a Chol nationalist even though he wasn't a Chol Maya himself, said, "Okay. Here we are talking at this conference in a place that is surrounded with Chol Maya, Palenque is a Chol town now, Palenque in the past was probably a Chol Maya city. Why don't you put these names, when you do determine their phonetic reading, in Chol Maya, the Chol branch of Maya, rather than in Yucatec Maya which is what you've been using?" And so he suggested what this might be. So we ended up with-- Instead of Kan Balam for the son of Pakal, we ended up with him being Chan Bahlum and this is what all the early publications show. We now know that this is wrong, <laughs> that in fact Kan Balam used his Yucatec name, Kan Balam rather than Chan Bahlum, but that all came later. At any rate, that was a fabulous conference and from then on the Maya decipherment just -- there was nothing that could stop it.

Q: That's great. Thank you.

Michael Coe: There were other things that went on at this Palenque, first Palenque Mesa Redonda, other than working on glyphs, many, many things about the history of Palenque, its discovery. Gillett gave a wonderful thing on the discovery and subsequent history of Palenque and we had a lot of iconography for the first time where people could really talk knowledgeably about what was going on on these reliefs up there. My student, David Joralemon, gave a preliminary paper which he later revised on blood iconography among these people and he was the first person to identify the perforation

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ceremony that Maya rulers and their families had to go through at various times in their careers, particularly a ghastly one in which rulers were expected to perforate the penis with a stingray spine or something like it and draw blood which was then scattered on paper to the gods, and this is on a number of these Palenque reliefs and the sting ray spine itself gets deified, it becomes sort of personified, so it's a god in its own right. It's papers like that that came out. For instance, Larry Bardawil, my -- another wonderful student from Yale was just a Yale undergraduate at that time, was the first person to really write knowledgeably about what he called the principal bird deity. We now realize that the principal bird deity is the main deity of the pre classic Maya, commemorated on these giant stucco masks at pre classic sites and secondly, the principal bird deity is quite clearly the bird that's on top of the so-called crosses of the Temple of the Cross and the Temple of the Foliated Cross and we know that the principal bird deity is the horrific Vucub Caquix or Seven Macaw of the Popol Vuh, who the hero twins killed with their blowguns. It was Larry Bardawil at that conference who told us about this and who wrote a wonderful paper on this. I just wish he'd stayed in the Maya field instead of worrying about people's rear ends but that's another story. <laughs>

Q: When you got to Palenque for that conference, you first met Linda and saw her operating a little bit down there. What was your first impression of her?

Michael Coe: I knew very little about Linda Schele before I met her for the first time at the Palenque Mesa Redonda, the first Palenque conference, and I don't think I was quite prepared <laughs> for anybody like that. Linda was-- She didn't care what she wore and really had very salty speech. She really was a totally open person but I saw that she was incredibly intelligent and she had the most unerring hand for drawing which was really extraordinary and she could look at things. That's why I love to talk to artists about pre Colombian art because they see things that most art historians don't with a few exceptions, that they know how to see, they've got two eyes in their heads, and she had two wonderful eyes and learned right away on the spot. She was a -- I suppose a rough cut diamond in some respects, but I thought she was great and she had a holistic point of view here. She wasn't stuck on some anthropological theory or she had no theories of anything except about the Maya. She was a true culture historian. She could-- She just wanted to find out who had done this stuff and what it was and what it meant without any big ax to grind intellectually but she was an intellectual, there's no question about it. She didn't sound like it, she didn't look like it, but she certainly was it all done. She was a perfect self -- autodidact I think is the word, and she was the absolute autodidact. Of course, she later went on and got her PhD at the University of Texas and went through all the things and became a famous professor but she was just a natural scholar without any

training at all, any background at all except how to look and how to draw and she certainly knew how to do that.

The Dumbarton Oaks Miniconference of 1974

Q: Let's talk about how Betty Benson was at that first Mesa Redonda and decided to carry on—

Michael Coe: Betty and-- Betty Benson and I of course were old friends and old colleagues since I for some years was on the Harvard payroll as the adviser to the pre-Colombian collection at Dumbarton Oaks and Betty was curator and we worked very closely together on putting together the permanent exhibits there and the new Philip Johnson wing. We set up the whole conference series, pre-Colombian conference series, for Dumbarton Oaks, and our first publications came out in *Studies in Pre-Colombian Art and Archeology* where -- that was a joint collaboration between Betty and myself, although she did <laughs> most of the work and most of the contributions were hers, but this was to me an important part of my life, to work with Betty.

Q: Were you at that first Mesoamerican conference when Tania was there and Floyd gave the—

Michael Coe: Yeah. We thought that one up. <laughs>

Q: Tell me about that one a little bit.

Michael Coe: Well, Betty and I thought up the first Dumbarton Oaks conference on writing systems, and it wasn't a universal success because Tania -- <laughs> was there, and Floyd, and George Kubler from Yale University, but not everybody there was on the same track by a long, long shot, <laughs> and Tania of course, being a Russian, <laughs> -- having married a Russian and had a lovely life with my wife -- Russians are the most contrary people on earth, and Tania could get contrary and she was contrary at that particular conference. The one paper that stood out that everybody still reads is Floyd's take on what Thompson would have called an affix. It's a pair of little glyphs that appear at the top of some of what Thompson called main signs. We now know that this is the sign for king, it's one way of writing king or ahau in Maya. Floyd was the first one to get on to that and he established the methodology for reading Maya hieroglyphs, that is, how you go through substitutions and a knowledge of the inscriptions and a knowledge of the codices and a knowledge of the language, which -- he was mainly using Yucatec Maya which he knew very well, to come up with a reading for these two little glyphs which

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Thompson called the Ben-Ich Affix. That isn't how we read them today, we read it as *ahau* today, and the reason we read it as *ahau* or king is that Floyd told us how to do this. So he was the guy who established the methodology for reading hieroglyphs, individual hieroglyphs, and he did it in that conference.

Q: Let's get to the post-Palenque period. Betty was at Palenque and decided to do a conference. Talk about that.

<crew talk>

Michael Coe: Well, Betty Benson set up, post the first Palenque conference, the first Palenque mini conference because she felt that what these three people were doing, Peter, Floyd and Linda, with Palenque should be followed up, that it's got to be fine-tuned or honed and extended out and see where we go from here, and Dumbarton Oaks was the place to do it because of its excellent library, its collections, its long history in this kind of research so I came too -- I was invited too to this. When I -- we sat down in this basement conference room at Dumbarton Oaks in this wing that Philip Johnson had built, Tania was on one end of the room with a young graduate student that she had brought and Linda was over here on another end of the room and I was sort of there also, and of course Peter and also Dave Kelley came to this thing and of course Floyd was there, George Kubler from Yale, the art historian from Yale, who I generally didn't agree with on any subject. <laughs> The problem was that it was quite clear at this point that this was oil and water as far as Tania and Linda were concerned, and it hurt me, because these were two people that I admired enormously but they couldn't have been more different. They were utterly different people, Tania every bit the Russian lady and absolutely always impeccably dressed and careful about what she said. I never heard her swear or do anything that a lady wouldn't do and <laughs> on the other hand Linda, this sort of rough talking, roughly dressed, southern gal from Tennessee who didn't really care what or how she said it, often quite sloppy in the way she dressed, the way she spoke and even sometimes the way she wrote because she made lots of mistakes in her written English but it didn't make any difference. This person was an absolute pioneer and trailblazer right from the word 'go.'

It was quite clear that they were not going to get along but mainly on Tania's point of view, and she decided to be very negative and very contrary Russian style. Russians love to be contrary, and Tania-- There were many stories that Carnegie people told about Tania. If you tell Tania, "Gee, it's a nice day," Tania said, "No, no. It's just terrible. I see thunderclouds and it's going to rain" and what not. If you tell her it's a beautiful- it could have been a beautiful day but it's not, it's going to rain today and what-- "No, no. It's going to stay clear all day." And she did this regularly. She loved to take the

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opposite point of view. She really enjoyed this but with -- she really dug her heels in there and she wasn't willing to admit that this was a viable project even though they are simply following up things that she had really blazed the way for in her work on Piedras Negras and at Yaxchilan, that is, you had a date and you had a verb that followed it and then you had somebody's name who did it, and this is the way dynastic records work. Perhaps because George Kubler was there, because George never really thought that this was real writing in the first place, and he said this quite clearly in the conference that Betty and I set up at Dumbarton Oaks that Floyd gave his great paper at, perhaps under George's influence, because she really respected George, she would actually come out and deny right there and then that we were dealing with a writing system like this or with history. And I got very discouraged by this. I thought this isn't going to go anywhere and I left early. I just got up and packed out but others stayed luckily and they went on, that core group that Betty had, without Tania and without George Kubler and without other outsiders like myself, and really accomplished a great deal.

The discovery of name-tagging in the Maya texts

Michael Coe: In 1979, my friend, the archeologist David Pendergast, invited me up to Toronto to the Royal Ontario Museum where he was a curator to give a talk. I can't remember what I did talk about but I gave a lecture there and while there he showed me the collections that he had been making at a site called Altun Ha in Belize. It's one of the two or three major Maya sites in Belize and he had found some fantastic tombs there, first rate excavator, which, unlike a lot of Maya archeologists, he published in beautiful detail, but at any rate he had a pair of obsidian ear spools that fit in the lobes of the ears of probably some great Maya king at one point, who was buried in a tomb, and they were made out of obsidian which is a -- very rare to find polished obsidian at this point for the classic Maya, but so they were. And they had-- There was an inscription on these ear spools. I couldn't read it. Nobody at this point could read it although it started off with the "u" sign which is sort of like a bracket that shows up in Landa's syllabic signs in his so-called alphabet as *u* and we know *u* is a possessive but I didn't know what it -- what was going on. So I said, "Well, there's Peter Mathews who is a graduate student at Yale, who's the guy to do this -- to look at this."

So I had him contact Peter Mathews, send him a drawing of this, and Peter Mathews, using the Knorosov approach, using Landa's syllabary and what not, was able -- and also what we learned subsequently at the Albany conference and other places -- was able to read this as *u tup* or *u tu pu* with the final *u* not pronounced. *U tup* means "his ear spool", *u* being the possessive. It's a third person singular possessive, *u*, his, hers or its,

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and there was the ear spool. This was a fabulous breakthrough, absolutely, because it meant that this idea of possession, somebody declaring that they owned something, we call it name-tagging in Maya, but this is important among the Maya. We know that inscriptions of this sort are in other societies where they're labeling things. For instance, the Norse used to label their jewelry using runic script saying 'So and So's safety pin or dagger' or something like this. Well, the Maya did the same thing. They labeled everything. They stuck labels. They loved to name things and – "This is So and So's" or "this is this, this is that". So when you say *u tup* and then followed by a name, it means this is the ear spool of this king of Altun Ha and that was a king of Altun Ha. This is what led to the opening up of this whole business of how do you read my PSS, the Primary Standard Sequence, on this pottery and that begins another story. That opened the whole thing up. A whole major body of Maya script now became possible to read thanks to this breakthrough of Peter Mathews'.

<crew talk>

The opening of the "floodgates of decipherment" in the mid-1980s

Michael Coe: On getting into the 1980s, leaving the 1970s, I mean, where we had the Palenque Mesa Redonda people, the mini conference people, the Albany conference people, the linguistics coming in with the iconographers, with the hieroglyph people in part with some of the archeologists but not quite yet. We get into the 1980s and at Yale we were lucky enough to attract some really amazing graduate students at this point, I mean really extraordinary ones. A cohort of students came up who were really amazing in what they could do, what they knew, the background they had, and they were just totally into Maya hieroglyphic writing. We had Peter Mathews here, who had come to study with Floyd and two students came to study principally with me. I was their so-called supervisor. I did absolutely zero supervising cause they didn't need any supervision, and these were Karl Taube and Steve Houston. And these were people who I would just sit down and listen to. There was no point in teaching any more, I was learning from them. I was taking more notes than they were taking from me. And it was an amazing experience. Every single class was a revelation. You just sit there and I just wondered that this -- I was lucky enough that this happened to me in my lifetime. We also had at the same time a marvelous young woman scholar come in who was in the same cohort, who was a specialist on the Aztecs and -- Louise Burkhart, who is now the world's authority or one of the world's authorities on Aztec theater, Aztec literature, and Aztec poetry. I mean a tremendous scholar in her own right. And they were all there at the same time along with all kinds of other interesting people. And, of course, there were people in art history who'd come to study with George Kubler who later -- people who

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later came on to study with Kubler's successor Mary Miller. So Yale was an extremely exciting place to be in in the 1980s and I really was astonished by this.

It turned out that these people were also in close contact with a whole network of other people in about their same generation, all young people. I like to call them the Young Turks, and this was an extraordinary network. In this country for instance David Stuart, who had begun his first hieroglyphic researches at the ripe age of eight and gave his first I think public lecture at age 13 like sort of Christ among the elders. I mean it was really an extraordinary thing. Was absolutely crackerjack. Went to Princeton as an undergraduate but still continued into this and was in close contact with Steve and Karl and also with people elsewhere in Europe. There were Europeans who were becoming closely involved with this. In particular, for instance I think of Nikolai Grube in Germany, a young German scholar, who was at the University of Bonn, in Bonn, Germany. And Nikolai spoke perfect English, perfect Yucatec, Maya; absolutely a totally knowledgeable person about the Maya, started correspondence with these people. Later on, of course, e-mail comes out so now these people can instantly communicate with themselves all over the world. This network is now even larger. People who have become involved with Linda when Linda was at the University of Texas, who were really extraordinary people, who were involved with some of the first Austin conferences, like Barbara MacLeod for instance -- I mean here's the kind of person, Barbara MacLeod is a professional stunt flyer, this is what she does, it's on her calling card, and yet she's one of the great experts on Maya hieroglyphic writing.

All of these people were trading information and coming up with one decipherment after another. Almost every week there'd be a new decipherment. So Thompson's jibe that, okay, if this is a so-called decipherment how come that we're not getting this flood of decipherments? Well, now we've got the flood of decipherments. And they were just coming in at an amazing intervals.

Q: Let's get into the specifics of how that came about. A lot of the people I've talked to one of the real breakthrough points was David Stuart around 1984 took a second look at Eric Thompson's *Fish as a Maya Symbol for Counting* and discovered that the symbols in there which had to do with the count forward and count backward turned out to be all variance of the syllabic *u* and discovered that they were... There may be 15 variants of *u*.

Michael Coe: Wouldn't it be better to have David Stuart... I'm not the guy to do that really. That's true but it's one that you want to get the guy who did it.

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Q: But then that begins to lead into once we discover that, these sort of variants begin to collapse, we discover that <inaudible>.

Michael Coe: That -- that I could say about yeah. Things that look like they're logograms, logographs, turn out to be actually just variants on syllabic signs. This is what gets into the P.S.S.

Q: Then we begin to get into the P.S.S. and you get David Stuart coming up with *u tzib* and Steve and Karl coming up with *u lak* and Barbara with the structure of the P.S.S. And then discovering that the P.S.S. extends to the monuments. Can you talk a little bit about that progression, where ultimately they find out that this name tagging is going on all over the Maya script?

Michael Coe: Yeah, and very ancient, it goes back probably into the pre-classic. It's like, you know, *e pluribus Unum*. I mean it's something that nobody really understands completely but it's on every penny. You know, it goes back to Roman times.

The P.S.S., that I guess I discovered, the one thing that I did discover in Maya hieroglyphic writing, it will be remembered that I thought that this was some kind of a chant, a kind of a repetitive chant that had the names of a lot of gods or things that you'd see when you died and went into Xibalba, the underworld. This group of young Turks in the 1980s, some of whom were my own students, showed that I was completely wrong. And I'm very, very happy to admit it because it turned out that what they found is really much more interesting than what I had proposed. They established, the people who were working on the P.S.S., who included Nikolai Grube and Barbara MacLeod and David Stuart and Steve Houston, Karl Taube and others, that this was actually a piece of name tagging too, just like the *u tup* on the ear spools that Dave Pendergast had from Altun Ha that Peter Mathews had cracked. And what they showed was that this is actually a dedicatory phrase, a very, very common one, not only on pottery, it's ubiquitous on the pottery, where it's dedicating generally chocolate pots, a vase to hold *cacau* or liquid chocolate, but it's also on the monuments. It's elsewhere and it goes way back probably even into the late pre-classic as a -- kind of a repetitive dedicatory thing like we have *e pluribus Unum* on our pennies. But the average American hasn't the foggiest idea what *e pluribus Unum* means, it goes back to our Roman cultural ancestors. So it's Latin. But it's simply on all our pennies. This thing is on everywhere and what they found was that what I had thought were logographic writings for gods names turned out to be almost completely phonetic. They're simply variants of things that you could find in some cases in Landa's syllabary but written by scribes who were artists, who loved to do fancy calligraphy. And that's why they looked different. They found out that the initial sign basically means something like, "it ascends" or "this is sort of raised to heaven" type of

thing. And once you get through the sort of initial -- couple of initial signs then it'll go into something that says *u tzib*, the writing or the writing of, or it is written here, or painted here, because *tzib* means writing and painting. And then it goes on to describe the shape of the pot, what kind of a vessel is this, is it a vase, is it a dish, or is it a dish with three hollow feet on it. All of these had different names and they're all written phonetically, we now know thanks to this breakthrough. And then it goes on to describe what's in it. And since most of these things are deep vases we know from the iconography and from the phrase itself and from the glyph up there for *cacau* or chocolate, which really was pinned down by David Stuart and others, that this thing really is to hold chocolate. And it'll even tell you what kind of chocolate it is because they put different flavorings in chocolate. And then the whole thing will end up with the name -- as I had known all along, the name of the person, the title, often the place where the person came from, where he/she ruled, and then the end of it that's it.

So it's a nametag, that's all it is. And it turns out to be on everything, because a Maya liked to dedicate everything: buildings, rooms, monuments, it's all over the monuments. So it's not rare at all. And it's -- the most common kind of Maya writing is this. So without knowing -- here's where a blind person, myself, blind to the real meaning of it, still could pick out something that was worth looking at and that's all I did. I was the sort of person who made it possible to look at this and to do it you have to look at the vases, you can't snoop them and say well this has been-- not been dug up by archaeologists or in a regular archaeological report therefore we won't look at it. You never would have cracked this without looking at a big sample and the only way to do it is to go into museums and even private collections to see this stuff. And that's what I had to do and that's what the Grolier show was all about.

The 1986 *Blood of Kings* exhibition and its impact

Q: Moving onto another show that had a significant impact, the Blood of King show.

Michael Coe: Yeah, I gave the evening talk there, the, you know, whatever it was, the keynote speech.

Q: What was the impact of that show? What was the new narrative that it presented about the Maya and what reaction came about at that point from archaeologists?

Michael Coe: Negative. Yeah.

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Q: And sort of around that show, not going back to the controversy over Pakal, the stress and strain between archaeology and epigraphy. Can you talk a bit about that, about this new vision and the resistance to it?

Michael Coe: Yeah right. What was the date?

Q: The date is '86, is it not?

Michael Coe: One of the really great Maya shows or exhibits of all time was in 1986 in Fort Worth, Texas at the Kimball Art Museum: The great *Blood of Kings* show. This was a blockbuster in every sense, not just in the number of marvelous objects that were shown, they even got – the organizers even got some of the sculptures that Maudslay had taken to the British Museum from Maya sites like Copán. But it was so exciting because it had an entirely different take on the classic Maya that shocked a lot of people and certainly never bored anyone. It was an immensely exciting and beautiful show, and it was put together by Mary Miller and Linda Schele. Mary had come to Yale. She'd been a student of Gillett Griffin's at Princeton and then came and studied with George Kubler and with me, I'll have to admit, at Yale. And then, of course, went on to get a Yale appointment. And a wonderful art historian. And Linda Schele.

And it was a tremendous collaboration and what they followed up on was this discovery by David Jorolomon and others that blood was so enormously important to these Maya rulers. The idea of descent and self-sacrifice are both involved in this kind of thing, the perforation and so forth, all of this. A lot of this came from David Stuart who began to see blood everywhere in the iconography and in the hieroglyphs. He later tempered his ideas on this but it was a rather darker view of the Maya, of the classic Maya, than anybody had ever taken. That they were not the peaceful theocracy that Thompson had been telling us about all the time or Morley and the others, but rather quite involved with absolutely bloody warfare, sacrifice, self-sacrifice of their own blood. And this was all through the art. There were horrific scenes that they showed that warfare was a way of life, not just kind of an aberration that was touched upon them several times, it seems they were an enormously warlike people, a lot of mutually contesting smaller principalities like the ones in Renaissance Italy, northern and central Italy during the Renaissance, they were always committing mayhem on each other, this is what the Maya were doing also. They were like a lot of other people in other words.

Well, the reaction to this on the part of our more archaeologically inclined colleagues was pretty negative, without any question. Part of it was jealousy that these people, without actually digging this stuff up, had come up from museum collections, largely with fabulous stuff to show. But secondly that the claim of this show was that the

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epigraphy was as important as anything else, even as important as the dirt archeology in understanding what the Maya were like; that epigraphy and iconography had as much to say as putting a shovel in the ground. And, of course, they felt, the archeologists did, that their role as field archaeologists was being downplayed.

So the field started to split at this point. You began to get on one side a lot of very disgruntled archaeologist naysayers who were saying well, this is nothing but a lot of looted stuff, and gives the wrong impression of the Maya, and how do you know all of this? And why should we bother to learn the hieroglyphs, and what-not, we all know that Thompson said that they don't tell you anything anyway except the dates. And on the other hand all of the people who had come through this tradition that really began with Knorozov and with Tania and continued through the Palenque Mesa Redonda into the later conferences and into the 80s. And the archaeologists just turned their backs on it and said we don't want any part of it, which was really stupid and a tragedy. Luckily later on this became an untenable position but this is what was said at the time.

To me it's ridiculous that a person who claims to be a Maya archaeologist would not know how the Maya themselves wrote anything or be able to read anything that they wrote. Can you imagine an Egyptologist who didn't know how to read Egyptian hieroglyphs? I mean even little kids in school who get interested in Egyptian culture are told by their teachers, go out and learn how to read some of these Egyptian hieroglyphs and so they do. Can you imagine a near eastern archeologist in Mesopotamia who couldn't read a clay tablet? All of them know how to do this. Mayanists feel they don't have to do it, the Maya archaeologists, and there are still some of them stuck in this ridiculous position. They've dug their heels in and okay, they'll never get out of it, they'll never move.

Stresses between archaeology and epigraphy, finally resolved by discoveries at Copán

Q: A lot of these archaeologists had come up during the 60s when there was a sort of distrust of the political pronouncements from above, that what our government had to say was a bunch of propaganda... But also there was also a general movement of -- instead of studying the elites let's study the common people; they were doing very worthwhile things and studying residential stuff. And they resented that this was all communication about the elite.

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Michael Coe: Yeah, the famous superstructure that Marxists like to talk about. Yeah, I can say something about that. A large part of the prejudice of the ordinary Maya archaeologists who wear spade tie clips on their ties that -- the ones who actually do the digging in the field -- that this was basically a misconception of the ancient Maya that had been put forth by the epigraphers and the iconographers and the art historians. And that that was all elite culture, that that only concerned a tiny fraction of the population, that this isn't where the real life of the Maya went on. They were digging residential structures and mapping. This was all important work, so to speak, because it had been ignored by the earlier Carnegie archeologists, getting the settlement pattern, where people actually lived.

But the idea came up that basically what the hieroglyph people were saying was so important on the monuments was just a lot of propaganda. Coming from on top, the elite had been strutting around and slapping on these monuments all these doings which the archaeologists were -- some of them were even saying were made up history, weren't real history in the first place, that this is just to establish their importance. And yet we do know that, we're almost certain, like other societies like this, this was a top-down society in which really it *was* an elite who did most of the innovation, and it was the elite who produced the things that then filtered down through the entire society. And again, I would suggest that these people living in the -- even on the outskirts of the typical Maya city might well have been able to read and understand more of what they saw. They certainly were brought in at regular times to participate in these things, so I find that argument completely ridiculous.

Q: There were a couple of things that sort of helped bring a lot of archeologists around. I'm thinking of the Rio Azul chocolate pot.

Michael Coe: Well that did. The Rio Azul chocolate pot didn't bring the excavator of Rio Azul around, I can assure you. Dick Adams... Copán was the one that really did it.

Q: Okay, could you talk about either of those.

Michael Coe: Yeah, I'd rather talk about Copán at this point. It was at Copán that the real reconciliation took place between these two schools, between on the one hand the dirt archaeologists and on the other hand this group of epigraphers and iconographers and art historians. And it turned out to be a joint enterprise, I think because of the really broad view of culture history that the excavators of Copán had, unlike some other Maya sites. And right from the beginning the Copán projects that took place between the Honduran government and the University of Pennsylvania and Tulane University and Harvard University, right from the very beginning these projects brought in the

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epigraphers. They decided we're not going to hold them off, we're going to see what they have to say about the inscriptions.

And Linda was among the people who was working at Copán, she was a very important part of that. She brought David Stuart in on this and other people also involved in this. And Bill Fash's wife is a— basically a specialist in Copán sculpture and what not. But what they came up with from the inscriptions was, when they really began to read the whole thing, the dynastic history, they found out that it was a single dynasty with a list of 16 or 17 or so kings that went back to a founder. And that there it was in all the inscriptions on one of these altars, Altar Q, you have a reference going around this wonderful altar with all these characters sitting in order, sort of, so that the sixteenth kind could take office. And there's a reference to the founding on the top of that altar. This is what the epigraphers said. Well, the ordinary archeologist would say that's baloney, that's made up history, it's all propaganda, it's retrospective -- if you really dug this out you wouldn't find it.

Well, they did find it. And it was by tunneling into the state temple at the center of the Copán acropolis and basically coming in from the river bank, on the river cut there, and putting in tunnels to the earliest, earliest structures. They found the founder, and lo and behold he was this guy Yax Kuk Mo' who we already knew about from the epigraphy. Well, that put the nails in the coffin of the theory that this stuff was just nothing but made up retrospective propaganda, that there was no reality to these histories, that we could ignore them, because you couldn't ignore them. The epigraphy and the archaeology came absolutely together, and when those excavators from Pennsylvania came in on Yax Kuk Mo's tomb and that of his wife and his descendants, they were exactly, all the way through, exactly what the epigraphers had said that they were going to find. So that was it. And it's made a new era for Maya studies.

Q: Today don't most projects have people trained in epigraphy?

Michael Coe: Well, it depends where you are. As long as there's inscriptions. During this decade of the 80s and into the 90s it became pretty clear to me and to others that David Stuart, who had begun as a protégé of Linda, I mean he was basically a Linda discovery since he was a child, that he had been moving in a different direction than Linda in one important way. Not in all ways but in one important way. And this was also true of other people associated with David Stuart such as Steve Houston, that Linda was a big picture person as far as hieroglyphic writing went and she believed in getting everything out as fast as possible into the public. You know, here it is warts and all. And "we may change it later, but this is what I say now". Of course, this is what shocked Tania so much about Linda, that she would publish like this, and Linda did publish a lot

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of things that are no longer tenable: decipherments that we know are -- have to be corrected and what not. Linda wasn't much -- well, she really was interested in verbs and in words and knew a lot about Maya and about the language. But when you look at a Maya hieroglyphic inscription, particularly glyph blocks and what not, there's all this kind of other stuff, little things that gets stuck into a hieroglyphic group or a cluster of hieroglyphs or let's say a logograph with a lot of things around them. And Linda had a tendency to not look at those, to not consider they were important as long as you've got close to the real meaning, that word, the phonetic part must be right.

And this wasn't accepted by David or by Steve and by people in their group. They were sticklers about this. They wouldn't publish anything unless they had tested it out with substitutions, where let's say you had looked at a lot of occurrences of this particular glyph in different contexts and you could sometimes pick out where the scribe had played around with the script, you could do it with this Maya script, and use different alternative ways of writing it, writing it all phonetically or partly phonetically or largely logographically. But that these little things that the Maya's would stick in there really meant something, everything they put down in a glyph had a real function.

And this meant that you had to tune up the grammar. And this was the next step. You had to really know which Mayan language you were talking about out of the 29 or 30 Maya languages or which ancestral language. You had to work in that language and you had to know the grammar of that language. Now Maya grammar for somebody like me, I mean I'm not too bad a learner of languages but I can tell you I studied Yucatec Maya for a year and it is one tough language. The Maya grammar is very difficult and very subtle and it gets completely expressed in this script. And Linda had kind of ignored this. She was an all, as I say, the big picture; get the general meaning of this. If it makes sense to her it's going to make -- that's the way it made sense to the ancient Maya. And this is no longer accepted. These people are perfectionists.

It's the same thing that happened in the Egyptian script. Champollion made his big breakthroughs but that wasn't the end of the decipherment of Egyptian by a long, long shot. He didn't decipher the whole script, there were lots of things about the grammar that had to get fine-tuned in later decades. Even in 100 years they're still working on certain details of middle Egyptian, which most of the script is in. And the same thing is true with Maya. So it's changed there's no question about it. But Linda was still the great figure of her generation.

The influence of Linda Schele on Maya studies

Q: Let's talk about Linda Schele and her role and impact has been in the field.

Michael Coe: What Linda brought to this field was to give it a fancy name, a holistic point of view of Maya civilization. In modern parlance, she gave us the whole enchilada. I mean she was an art historian; she was an epigrapher. She knew all about archaeology and worked with archaeologists. She was an architectural historian; she knew the ethnohistory. She knew the Maya themselves personally. She had just a total view of these people. And she took the breakthrough that had been made by Knorosov and all of his followers and by Proskouriakoff and Heinrich Berlin on their side about the historical side of the whole script and she brought an understanding of the entire culture that we'd never had before. We now saw the Maya people as a whole. And having done this, I think she came the closest to understanding what the classic Maya were like than any other scholar whose ever lived. Everybody else has just seen, you know, one tiny little segment of it. She saw the whole thing. And okay, she made plenty of mistakes, was sloppy at times and other times, but she was right much more often than she was wrong.

And she managed to teach this to other people. She brought in people. I mean being so holistic she could talk to anybody about this, just in the way Morley was in his day. That is, somebody who can reach out to the public immediately, either in print or in person. She was a charismatic speaker and she just entranced people with Maya civilization and brought in people who never would have been in the field into the field to work with her. She was a great teacher and a great recruiter of people to study epigraphy. So she advanced the field in that respect. So I say at least two things: one as a kind of taking the holistic approach to the whole thing and she did make some individual decipherments that still stand up very, very well. But she brought the whole understanding, so you could look at a piece of Maya art and understand what the heck these people were doing with it, why did they have this particular batch of men and women doing these things on this stele, in terms of the whole civilization. And on the other hand she was able to communicate that to somebody else.

Now this I would contrast with Tania who was an incredible person but a terrible communicator with the outside world. She -- except for her watercolors -- she didn't like to tell other people about this, where Linda just -- she was just so happy getting other people involved with the Maya, the way Morley had been. And I think this was her great thing. She was a recruiter of people into this field. So it's those two things that I think will always keep Linda as one of the great Mayanists of all times.

The current state of Maya studies.

Q: Where do you think we are now and what lies ahead? What do we have to look forward to?

Michael Coe: Well I think right now the field is in a very, very good shape. We know how this writing system worked. We can write books on it that tell you how to read a Maya hieroglyphic inscription as well as Egyptologist can tell us how to read an Egyptian inscription. We know how the system worked. It's just the details that are getting worked out now. There are some glyphs that are very, very hard to decipher right now that will be very, very difficult to do because they're completely logographic. That is, they're logograms, they're names, usually of kings, that are expressed in terms of some weird animal head or something like that. And we don't know what this is. If there's no phonetic substitutions anywhere or phonetic compliments from the syllabary then I don't know that we would ever be able to read them.

But it doesn't matter; we still know a great deal about those inscriptions. We're also in very good shape now that any big expedition into a place that does have inscriptions is going to bring an epigrapher along, just as Old World digs in a place like Egypt or Mesopotamia always have an epigrapher on hand, or in China. Mayanists have finally come around to this and there are a few of the old guard who still snarl and growl that there's no point in epigraphy, it's just a waste of time, but I think almost all the younger group now realize that they're only going to be able to do good work if you have a collaboration between these two.

Now, the future: we're getting to know bit by bit something about the pre-classic origins of Maya hieroglyphic writing. We don't know much now, but sites like San Bartolo cannot be unique, with painted inscriptions, murals with hieroglyphs on them. Even the best people like David Kelly have a hard time telling us what these things say, because they are so early. And I think in the future when we come to dig in places extensively like the Mirador Basin, which had great cities of the pre-classic, is as big or bigger than any of the biggest classic cities -- they must have incredible mural programs with lots and lots of painted inscriptions and what not, and when we get to know more about this origin period we'll be able to understand some of the really earliest Maya inscriptions of the classic better than we understand today. And that will be an important move. And I think in 20 or 30 years somebody could do a very good program on that subject because we'll know a lot more at that point.

On another end, I think, depends entirely upon fate. Some day somebody is going to get into a Maya cave -- and they're probably thousands of thousands of Maya caves that have

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never been seen that were used by the Maya for ritual purposes because the whole Maya ruins are riddled with caves -- but somebody's going to find a dry cave, or with a dry chamber with a box in it, or a bunch of boxes, and in these boxes they're going to find a bunch of codices, of paper books from the classic. We have no classic books and if -- even the discovery of *one* classic book is going to completely rewrite the story of the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing, because almost certainly we're going to find -- if we had some Maya books we're going to find Maya literature that's more than just rituals and calendrical stuff and astronomy and this type of things, we're going to find perhaps archives of letters, we're going to find some of the great myths that we can see on the pottery, that we only have glimmerings of from the Popol Vuh, in their entirety in these books. And there's going to be actual speech, which we start seeing on some of the Maya pottery now, actual conversations between gods or between principal figures in the first person with little balloons coming out connecting these people to the actual hieroglyphic inscriptions that are up there. "This is what they said", just like in the cartoons. You do see this on the pottery occasionally < and if one can find a bunch of codices that's what you're going to find in this kind of thing. It'll be mind blowing. And the lucky generation that's going to be alive when that's found it's going to be a different world indeed.

Q: Another thing you started to mention earlier, and I may have cut you off a little bit .. I think the pots are now the largest body of Maya texts. And except for the P.S.S. the texts on the body of the pots --

Michael Coe: They need much, much more work. People have ignored this now. They've got to get to work. That's right. The largest body of Maya text is not on the monuments at all but on the pots, on the pottery, vases and dishes and plates and jars of the classic Maya. There are tens of thousands of these and they've been -- certainly a significant number have been rolled out by Justin Kerr's rollout camera and rollout cameras possessed by other people. Most of the work on Maya hieroglyphic writing on the pots has been confined to the P.S.S., to the dedicatory phase, you know, usually telling you about the chocolate and so forth and who the owners were. But I think the most interesting part of it is going to be what I call the secondary text, the ones that we know have something to do with the scenes on the pottery, because very often they are connected with little curving lines coming from the mouth of the protagonists to the text. And you find first and second person statements sometimes there. You know, like "I did such and such" or "you did such and such". This is going to be the future of Maya hieroglyphic study I think. And it should be done in the near future. These texts have been ignored and there's just an enormous number of them and it simply means

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forgetting the P.S.S. for a while which has nothing to do with the scenes on the pots but rather concentrating on the secondary text.

Q: Why did the decipherment of Maya take so long? It took 140, 150 years until we really had a handle on it. Is it because it's such a complicated system, or because of the blinders people wore?

Michael Coe: Blinders. I've often asked myself as other people have, but not all people, why did it take so long to crack the Maya code, to decipher the Maya script? When you compare this with the far shorter time it took to decipher Egyptian or to decipher cuneiform in the near east. And one could say well, it's so complicated, you know, it was just too complicated to do, it sort of stumped them, they couldn't do it. I think it was because of who the decipherers were, or would-be decipherers, that I think it was – they had the wrong concepts about the script from the beginning. Landa thought that it was going to be all alphabets, just like A, B, C – our ABCs. And it went on from there until it became the idea that it – there's no phoneticism at all in it, and these things are all just kind of word pictures and sort of like what we call rebus writing: "I saw Aunt Rose", you draw a picture of an eye, and then a picture of a saw, and then a picture of a little ant running around and then a rose flower. That can stand for I saw Aunt Rose. This is really not anything but writing whole words. Or perhaps they didn't even have any kind of phonetic meaning whatsoever, because they weren't writing the language. And many epigraphers operated under that idea including at least in part Eric Thompson and Sylvanus Morley. So they came in with wrong ideas and they're going to get wrong answers out. We know that in any field of study, in the sciences in particular, if your concepts aren't right and your whole theoretical approach to this isn't right and you don't have the proper preparation you're not going to find the answers to something like this.

It is a complex script. But so is Egyptian and so is cuneiform. So why didn't they do it? It wasn't until you had somebody like Knorozov who knew about what had happened elsewhere in the world and who had a logical approach to it that you had a real breakthrough on this. I mean I know the bible says there's nothing new under the sun, and that's true with ancient cultures also. Many of the things that happen in the new world with its independent development of writing among the Maya, totally independent, were identical to what went on in the olden world in a parallel fashion. In that there's only so many ways to skin a cat, as they say, there's only so many ways to make a writing system. And people just didn't sit down and logically think out, with a few exceptions, how this might have been done. One of the people was Leon De Rosny, who we all look up to as a pioneer, but unfortunately his ideas were ignored by a great deal of the field and he just simply didn't keep on with it. So they say if you have jackass

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questions you get jackass answers. Nobody was asking the right questions for 150 years until this little Soviet guy sitting above the ice on the Neva River in Leningrad came up with the real solution to the decipherment.

<crew talk>

Michael Coe: The first Maya site that I ever saw, and for a long time the only one that I had seen, was Chichen Itza on that Christmas vacation back in my sophomore year in college. And I didn't know anything about the Maya at this point. I had looked at some books on the Maya but they were all junk. It wasn't until later that I read Morley's wonderful *Ancient Maya*. So I knew nothing about the script. I mean, I didn't know if it had been deciphered or not, if anybody could read it or how you read it. So, there was, crawling around in the ruins and staying at the Mayaland Lodge, the same place I was, was a Hollywood cameraman. And this man said, yes he could read all the hieroglyphic inscriptions, he'd managed to crack them, they were – “come on out to the Nunnery at Chichen where there are a lot of lintels up above the doorways and he'd read them, just that, I'd see”. So I went out there with this man, climbed up the Nunnery steps and up into these room -- doorways and he ran his hands over the glyphs up there and I've forgotten what he actually said, it was completely baloney of course. He couldn't read one of these, there's no question – but I didn't know it at that time, it sounded good to me. And it wasn't until I got back to Harvard and started to read something serious like *Morley's Ancient Maya* that I realized this guy was talking out of his hat.

However, if I went up into the ruins today and had somebody with me like Dave Stuart and he got up there and started to run his hands over the Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions on these lintels and said, yes, on such and such a day and such and such a year, such and such a ceremony was celebrated by these people and here were their names and so forth. And this is the lintel that they carved and put up – you can bet that that's true, that is the actual reading, that's how far we've come.