

## FEDERICO FAHSEN

*Interviewed March 12, 2005 on the campus of the University of Austin, Texas*



Architect and epigrapher [Federico Fahsen](#) has served as Guatemala's Director of Tourism, Deputy Minister of Foreign Relations and Ambassador to the United States. He has been involved in Maya epigraphy since 1983, excavated an important epigraphic stairway at the site of Dos Pilas, and has served as project epigrapher at the site of Cancuén.

*In this interview he discusses:*

- [The origins of his involvement in Maya epigraphy](#)
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- [The impact of the decipherment on the Maya of Guatemala.](#)

### Interview transcript

#### The origins of his involvement in Maya epigraphy

Q: Federico, can you fill me in on some of your background and how your life led you into epigraphy, how did you come from wherever you were into glyphs?

**Federico:** Well I started into glyphs after a very serious open heart surgery 30 years ago. I had been working for the Guatemalan government in a very high powered job in the ministry of finance. I was in charge of the external debt of Guatemala and the 1976 earthquake happened in February and so there was a lot of work and it was very stressful in trying to get money and donations and things and I was traveling to Washington and Paris and so on and eventually obviously I had a heart attack. And a few months later the doctor said you have to go to get the heart surgery and when I left the hospital, I asked the doctor, the cardiologist when do I come back? Thinking he was gonna say six months from now or whatever it takes, you know, the usual circumstance. And he said

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never, if you change your lifestyle. If you devote yourself to something that will make it so interesting for you that you can discharge part of your stress into it. But I said but I have to continue working. And he said, “you can do it but you can do something else and I don't mean playing tennis”, that was the one thing he said. Well you go back home and what can I do? So somebody, while I was recovering at home, sent me a book by Heinrich Berlin, the significance of Maya signs or glyphs. And I read it and I didn't have anything to do and so I read the book. I didn't understand a word of what was being said - - I had no contact before with Maya Epigraphy or whatever -- but it seemed to me that that was the thing that I should do. And so I started buying books and reading a lot and just about uh... a few months later David H Kelly came to Guatemala to deliver a paper in Landívar University. My wife was working there and she told me about it and so we went to hear him. And I said to my wife, bring him over to our house, I don't care what you do, bring him over. So she got him and we brought him into our house and we had a lovely long conversation of almost half the night, if not more, and I mentioned my interest and my questions and so on, and we began to establish a relationship. I would write to him, he was going to Sevilla for a sabbatical; I would write to him, he would answer and uh... he said to me “I'm way out there from my office, I'm in Spain, but I'll give you the name of a student of mine who's doing epigraphy, Peter Matthews.” So I wrote to Peter and Peter very kindly sent me some of his papers, he used to publish a little couple of pages of things, and he sent me a whole batch of them and we began to communicate. So I could say that the first two people that ever asked me to say something in the epigraphy world was David H Kelly first and Peter Matthews secondly and that was the beginning. And eventually I decided after some years of working that I could write a paper and I didn't know anything about scientific publications and this is in the early, no late 70's early 80's, I didn't know anything about that so I --

<Crew talk>

**Federico:** So I sent this paper to American Antiquity and I had no idea about the publication and much to my surprise I got back the reviews and some corrections from the editor and I said well, I'll accept the corrections, and I read the reviews and they seemed to be ok and so it was published. Right at that time I was named ambassador of Guatemala to Washington and Linda Schele and David Stuart and George and the Stuart family were living there and I had read and, you know, knew about them so we decided to meet.

<Crew talk>

**Federico:** It was in 1983 and 84 that I was named Ambassador to Washington and Linda Schele was living with the Stuart family. And I had read about them and heard of them

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and read their publications and so on, so I called them and invited them to the Embassy for lunch and, you know, wonderful lunch of course and they were surprised that somebody that they had never heard of had been published in *American Antiquity*, which is a very prestigious scientific archeological magazine, and from that and because they were there, we got involved in discussing things every so often, every two weeks or so. And of course Dumbarton Oaks and its library and exhibitions and things are there so I quickly became immersed in the community and went to the Kimbell Art Museum exhibit and met many of the people who were involved in that. Mary Miller among them and David Freidel and so in a sense you sort of slide into the field as you begin to meet people, ask questions, answer questions, write things, send them over to everybody. And Linda then became a fast friend because she used to travel to Guatemala and Copán. And when she traveled over the summer sessions we would meet in her house in Antigua or in a house that I have overlooking Lake Atitlan. She would bring her material and I would bring the ones that she wanted me to bring and we would spend, you know, a week or two weeks doing glyphs. And the way we did it and she taught me was to say alright, let's do Naranjo and we'd bring all the stuff from Naranjo and go glyph by glyph and discuss what it meant and what were the consequences of these things and so on. At that time it was still a little bit glyph by glyph kind of knowledge as opposed to for example what I'm doing today which is overall views of the monumental inscriptions and not necessarily taking just a glyph by glyph approach but what does it mean in the overall context of the regional situation. This is what I'm doing in Cancuén for example as well as in the Dos Pilas work. So in that sense my interests are more towards the historical consequences of what you're reading than the glyph by glyph type of decipherment because I accept whatever somebody as they David Stuart says is good, you know, I may say, well, I'll think about it but I basically accept when somebody better says something because my interests are more on the historical side of the inscriptions. I've worked with the Tikal inscriptions. I was one of the first ones along with Peter Matthews who tried to decipher and eventually did the decipherment of Tikal Stela 31, which is one of the magnificent texts that gives us an Early Classic version of the Tikal history. And then later on, some 20 years later maybe, Tikal Stela 40 appeared and I was called then by the Director of the Institute in Guatemala to decipher the text over there, which I found very close to what I had read in Stela 31 years before. Because it's a father and son kind of situation and he's talking about, the son is talking about the same things that the father is talking about.

## The glyph workshops in Guatemala and in Austin

The important thing about this is not so much, although this is obviously part of my life, not so much the epigraphic in terms of, what I said, glyph by glyph situations, but the fact that because of Linda and the work I did with her with the present-day Maya of Guatemala, I became very connected and interested in what these young men were trying to do. Linda used to say things like “let's give back their history” and I continued to do that as her legacy because with Nikolai Grube we conduct a workshop once a year. It's a whole week. We're thinking about that today. This time it's going to be the ball courts and the game. But before that it's been other subjects. And before the formal workshop I give a two day workshop for them as an introduction to whatever we're doing. And in the process of that I became also interested in teaching these young people in Landívar University their language and at the same time receiving from them their connections, their pronunciations, the real meanings of what these glyphs say. And I have many examples of these things where I say something, and one of them will say, “That's not exactly the way you pronounce it,” and gives me the correct pronunciation. Coming from a person who really speaks the language or saying this means “such and such” instead of what we've learned in books and that is one of the things that when I go back from class to my house, I have a feeling that something new is happening. And that this is one of the things that really the doctors in Houston were right about what it was I should have done and do continue to do. So this is basically what I've been, besides the fact that I've been doing quite a few publications and obviously working in archeological projects. I am the epigrapher for the Cancuén project, which is a marvelous place for inscriptions and also Dos Pilas both of these sites in South Western Petén where the beginnings of the collapse happened and where you can get a sense of how these people were feeling the pressures and basically working against the deluge that was going to happen, which maybe they weren't aware of fully, but knew something was happening. And to be able to get the inscriptions of those times was basic and is basic for me.

Q: them <inaudible> [re Linda Schele, her glyph workshops in Guatemala, and Federico's involvement with them.]

**Federico:** Well Linda invited me to be part of those workshops, she had already done a couple of them, one in Copán and when she came to Antigua and rented a house and lived there for the summer. It was obvious that had we known each other as much as we had, she wanted some help basically help for, you know, running the things and for teaching and being able to translate also between her English and their Spanish. So that's how I got involved with her. Of course eventually Nikolai stepped in and this was a wonderful experience for everybody involved. We did, for example, one [workshop] where we had most of the people that we invited, and the organization OKMA that you

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know of invited, were Maya priests, illiterate Maya priests, I mean illiterate in Spanish and illiterate in Maya hieroglyphs. And it was interesting to note that the words that we said and the meaning behind those words were quickly understood by them because they were the same-- they were the same things that they continued to do. For example there's a Maya glyph which has two volutes and then the glyph below is *b'utz*, which means smoke and the upper part is *k'aak* and some people here didn't know what it was. But if you had participated in a ceremony with Maya priests, you immediately know what they're doing and what glyph means because there's a connection there. One of the privileges that we have in Guatemala is that the Maya are still living there, they're walking around the streets. So when you read glyphs, you have an example of what those glyphs mean in real life. A couple of years ago in the university I mentioned the word for one of the titles that Maya kings use which is *ch'ahom*. It's a little glyph that has a hand with three dots there and basically it has a post fix which is incense. So *ch'ahom*, incense, that's what the glyph says. I mentioned that in class at the university and one of the Kanjobals, one of my students there said that's not really the way you pronounce it. So I said ok, give me the pronunciation and he said *ch'ahom*. Fine, you know, everybody take note of that. And then I said well what does it mean, because I knew that it meant "he who is in charge of ceremonies with incense", and he said well, in my town, in my village, these are the *Alcaldes Presadores* which is a position of great respect in the community, that is a couple of people who are elected to be those in charge of the ceremonies for the community for life. So if you're elected one of these forever, you will be an *Alcalde Presador*, *presador* means to pray for the community. And to get this back to me in the real sense and him saying we have these people in our village still in the year 2000, 2001 was, you know, an impressive situation. This is the kind of thing that we got with Linda from the workshops because we were able to get from them a lot of the stuff that they were giving us in one sense and we were giving back to them. That's why I say that she mentioned giving back their history.

Q: Could you tell me about your first experience of the workshops here in Austin, seeing how this group interacted and how Linda was with them and what that workshop process was like?

**Federico:** Well the Kimbell Art Museum exhibit [The Blood of Kings] was the first time I had been in an exhibit of the magnitude that that exhibit was and of course there were so many Maya artifacts and so many things to look at and read. The idea that we could look at the celts and the figurines and so on and have so many things to be explained by people like Linda and Mary Miller was something that, you know, opened my mind again...And then Linda said to me, look you have to come to Austin and I said "what for Linda, you know, what are these things like" and she said you have to come and you have

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to come and you'll stay in my house and there's no problem in terms of costs or whatever. She was very open for, you know, helping everybody feel comfortable. And so I finally landed here for one of the first ones. In her house, Peter Matthews and I slept on the floor of her studio so we could-- at the same time they were sleeping we were looking at everything that she had. That was a smaller house than the one she's now living-- was living now. So it was kind of cramped and I remember walking in here at the University and met Nikolai Grube for the first time. I knew some of the others but he was the first one-- the first time I met him, he looked so young, he looked like one of my children, you know. As a matter of fact they're practically the same age and I thought oh my goodness and he's somebody as young as that has already, you know, famous or doing famous work. Of course I had met David Stuart before in Washington, which also impressed me very much about what he was doing. You begin to feel a little bit like you're in another generation and there's always somebody behind you, which is of course the nature of epigraphic studies. Not only are you working like a game of building blocks, one on top of the other, you decipher something, somebody takes it and takes it over more and more and eventually you get to something but you're also very conscious of generations. Because unless you're a genius there's always something new with new people coming into the field because there are better studies in the universities or the programs where they're going and so on. So you see the field move forward and of course that's what epigraphy is. It should be moving forward always and we can see it in this workshop today [The Maya Meetings at UT Austin] where things are being explained that people are arguing, either for or against and this is the way we work.

<Crew talk>

**Federico:** Well, you know the beauty of these workshops, which is what we do every so often, is that we all get together. But with internet now, all you have to do is write a message and you get a response from many people around the world. Which we didn't have in the late 70's and 80's, we just at best wrote a fax to somebody saying, you know, I wrote this or think about this and maybe you'd get an answer by fax also. Nowadays, you know we get a message that's sent to a whole bunch of people and they keep writing back and forth, almost on a minute to minute basis. We just had something on glyph here that somebody decided that it meant this and we got a whole response of people and another of the advantages of what we're doing now is that you get to meet these young people that Mike Coe once called the "Young Turks", which we didn't know anything about. You read, for example, Peter Bero from Hungary, Uri from Ukraine, you know, all of these people, all of a sudden appear in the internet and they keep writing to you and you keep writing back and in these meetings we get to meet them face to face and we're oh, you know, hugging each other and saying I read your paper or give me a copy of this or

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whatever it is that we get to know. So the field as far as I'm concerned is moving not only forward but at a fast pace and this is good because we get to see from many places, Europe and parts of East Europe, you know, places that ,with the exception of Knorosov, we didn't know anything about, people being interested in Maya glyphs and epigraphy. And people, Australia, Peter Mathews, Canadians, Mark Zender, you know, from all over the world, all of a sudden we have a community. And it's not a large community, but it is a community now that keeps in touch with each other constantly and we are moving in the direction of doing this in the field of linguistics or in the historical field or in the art field and we all come together at one point in time and able to meet in these discussions. Sometimes face to face as a workshop or sometimes by just communication in the internet, or in exhibits, you know. There's going to be an exhibit in Los Angeles County Museum and Nikolai and I have wrote a paper together on Early Classic and Pre-Classic writing systems and there was the exhibit of the De Young Art Museum which was very good and Mary Miller wrote papers on that. You know, it's just everybody is doing something and we're doing it all together in a way, that's the beauty of it, we're not quarrelling. We have differences of opinions and things that have to do with the field itself but we're not quarrelling with each other.

### **His experience as a site epigrapher**

Q: Your experience being a site epigrapher what that means, what are the specific sites that you worked on or extraordinary places <inaudible> and what that has been like and what's the dynamic of interacting as an epigrapher with the archeology, does one feed into the other and feed back and forth?

**Federico:** I have been very lucky in working with professionals in Guatemala who are Guatemalans, particularly Dr. Antonio Valdez who besides being a friend has always insisted to me and to everybody that epigraphy and archeology go hand in hand, archeology and epigraphy mean the same thing, you can't do just stones.

<Crew talk>

**Federico:** Dr. Juan Antonio Valdez is extremely professional and besides a friend of mine and he's always insisted to me and to everybody that you cannot do archeology without doing the epigraphy because we're lucky in that sense that the Maya left us written records. If you were in another culture that didn't have written records you'd be trying to figure out what stones or pots mean in the sense of what the culture really was. And in that sense I have worked with him on many occasions at his request. But it's

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always been just, you know, this monument or that monument or something that appeared or writing a paper together on whatever. But my real first experiences have been in the last six years in projects. Before that it was always just the epigraphic section of whatever was being done in somewhere else. And my connection to that somewhere was sort of tenuous and I kept working and reading and publishing and working with the archeologists but somewhat from a distance. I was called by them when it was necessary; however six, seven years ago, Arthur Demarest, Dr. Arthur Demarest from Vanderbilt University with his team started working in the Cancuen project after having worked in the Dos Pilas project. Both of these sites in the southwestern Petén and the southwestern Petén is a key area for understanding the beginnings of the collapse. There are wars, there are violent acts, Dos Pilas and Calakmul joined together against Tikal and this is all written in the inscriptions, glyph by glyph literally and they tell you how they went and burned the site or he had to run and go somewhere else and, you know, it's a very graphic situation. And so he asked me.

Q: Talking how he-- the inscriptions in Dos Pilas <inaudible> narrative <inaudible> be very specific.

**Federico:** One of the reasons why the area in the southwestern Petén has been studied now for some time by different groups, Harvard project in Seibal and in Altar de Sacrificios, Itzan with another group and the Petexbatun project by Vanderbilt University is the fact that there are two man-- not too many hopefully there's more still. There are many, many texts, that whole region has texts of many kinds of information. There are some other parts of the Maya area that don't have that many texts so in that sense the southwestern is a prime area for understanding what was happening because it was written by them, themselves. And there's some graphic things there. For example in Dos Pilas Stairway One, there's a section that says mountains of skulls and pools of blood were of the Tikal people. And that's a very descriptive sense of saying what happened to the people in Tikal after Dos Pilas and Calakmul attacked them and went into Tikal and destroyed and burnt and, you know, killed the people around. So these inscriptions tell us these stories and conversely Tikal attacks Dos Pilas at one point and there's a couple glyphs there that say that the king of, the ruler of Dos Pilas is "*kaba yi pa witz*" [sp?] which means he fled to Aguateca. So we literally can see him moving up to Aguateca from wherever he was because he was forced to flee and in this sense the inscriptions are very nicely done and very graphic and why we chose those places is precisely because the information is at the same time that the archeology able to convey us the information of what was happening there. I was very lucky also that after the Petexbatun project had finished and we-- Dr. Demarest had moved someone else to Cancuén there was a hurricane in Guatemala in the Caribbean rather and there was some landslides in Dos

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Pilas and one of the pyramids, mountains there had a landslide and a block of stone appeared and immediately the guards noticed that it had some carvings, so they notified the institute and the institute notified Arthur and said please come and see what's going on. This is 2, 3, 5 years after the Dos Pilas had ended, so Arthur wasn't that much interested but also he was leaving for Vanderbilt because this was early August and he had to go back to teach. And it's not the first time that I've been pressed into something but he said well since it's a carving, send Federico to go and see what to do. So I assembled draftsmen and an archeologist and a representative from the institute and we all went to Dos Pilas thinking that maybe we're going to find a stone or something like that. So we weren't really sure of how much to buy supplies and whatever, but when we started looking at this the steps were sort of halfway to a section that had already been discovered years before and had been drawn by Ian Graham, so I said if these are down below and up, this thing must be-- meaning that there's something down below and probably up, so lets dig there and we discovered six stairways which had never been looked at since the collapse of Dos Pilas. And it told us exactly when the ruler, Ruler One, came to Dos Pilas age 6 years old from Tikal, sent by his brother to establish a garrison if you can use that word to control the Pasión River trade and be a part of a state that was under Tikal but at the same time part of the control of the area. And then all the steps down below gave us his early adolescence and the ceremonies that went on for his becoming part of the kinship. We ran out of food so we had to go back to Guatemala City and that was also part of these interesting experiences that happen in archeology, right. You always find that just at the time when you're looking at something you have to leave. It's happened in Palenque with Pakal's Tomb, it's happened everywhere and so we came back a couple of months later and I decided that by that time I thought of myself as the director of the project so I decided I could make all kinds of decisions. And I thought well if there are some steps here, 4 of them and there's 6 here, there must be two more on side and we excavated that and sure enough there was 2 more steps on that side. But again we ran out food and so we came back to Guatemala and eventually came back to Dos Pilas and then it was obvious that if you have 6 here and 6 here, there must be 6 on the other side and so we excavated there and we had the whole history of something like 75 years from the birth and arrival of Ruler One to his eventual death at the end of Stairway West. And that was the first time I was in charge of a project, with a group of people who were working with me. Of course Arthur Demarest and Vanderbilt were supporting the project and I had to consult with him, but it was, you know, how do you become the director of a project under your own responsibility? Cleaning something, you cannot go beyond what you have to clean, you can't scratch, you can really make a mistake if you do that. Telling people don't do it, guarding things that are exposed, what it would do-- it rains, you know --making all of these decisions. That was my first experience and then as a result-- not as a result, I was already involved in Cancuén but as

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a result of these experiences I was able to become co-director of the epigraphy section of the Cancuén project. And the first thing was to do some sort of lab analysis, trying to discover where the Cancuén inscriptions were, you know, detective work. There's a big panel which is in a Copán private museum that tells the story of Cancuén from its founding almost to the end. So go, try to discover it, get good photographs, get drawings of it, make sure that the monument is registered so that the owners cannot export it, you know, this was part of it. Half of the panel or at least one section of the panel is missing, there's a suspicion that it had been probably looted by drug leaders. I asked around, somebody eventually said look you're asking too many questions, stop doing it, you're gonna get into trouble so I dropped that. Went into other inscriptions, found parts of the hieroglyphic steps, one or two of them in private collections in Guatemala, others in different warehouses in the ministry of culture, tried to assemble them so that we can draw and get an idea of what it was saying. And all of a sudden all of these monuments begin to crop out because when you're doing archeology, you're finding these things as you excavate just a little bit underneath the ground and once they start coming up, I'm called to be present, to clean them, to do the epigraphic work, trying to establish the order of what they mean in terms of dates and individuals. We originally had one ball court marker which had been discovered by Maler in 1905 and it's in the museum in Guatemala. And we thought it was the ball court marker in the center of the ball court. And it turned out that he never said where he found it except that it was in a ball court, and it wasn't in the center, so where are the others; and so we started digging where we thought they would be and sure enough now we have the three monuments, one in a row of the other just like Copán, and its three ball court markers in the center of the field. And we discovered a big panel, one of the archeologists, a young lady who didn't have that many-- much experience, all of a sudden found the panel that has the ruler Tak Chanak [sp?] receiving the accession of power with the date and so on and it coincided with the date that was in the hieroglyphic steps and now we have proof of this with that other monument. And last year, 2004, we have a beautiful little panel that shows Tak Chanak with two officials of the court in a ceremony in what is called the quatrefoil sacred space. But more than that, that proved to us a suspicion that Tak Chanak was using a double emblem glyph, the emblem glyph of Cancuén and the emblem glyph of Machaquila and this is very strange because both of these sites were independent sites at one point. It's not like double emblem glyphs like Yaxchilan which is one place that has two emblem glyphs. These are two sites and the ruler is using both the emblem glyphs say I am the ruler of Cancuén and of Machaquila and this gives us a perspective of what the Maya were doing at that time, 780, 770, 760 up to 800 and that's further information that we have to process now into the field of Maya history. And that happens to be as the co-director of epigraphy a great experience, now this is coupled of course with the cold water baths in the early morning when you don't have anything except cold water, but

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that is nothing compared to the charge that you get from, you know, reading these things and getting a feeling of what is happening.

**Q:** You mentioned that you were gonna be doing something about <inaudible> Maya writing and wanted to get your opinion on Maya writing, a couple of things that David Stuart has said. He feels that the writing merged like all at once in a single episode as if were designed by committee and you don't see formative text, you sort of see text that are already fully developed, but he also felt that the text that it does start with things that are sort of single with blocks then gradually kind of splits like cells dividing into more complex units, what's your take on how the writings <inaudible> where it comes from and how <inaudible>?

**Federico:** I think that obviously it's hard to be able to say that it all started at one sweep, there must have been either a committee or, you know, the beginnings of saying well I'm going to say that this means that for a particular record and so I'll write this little thing this way, and that means that for all of you here to accept. And some people would accept it and probably go and say hey, you know, these other neighbors are saying that this means that and we have the same person or the same cargo or whatever so we'll use that too. But in the fact in the sense that the inscriptions from the very middle Pre-Classic over an extensive area were begun, it's difficult to say that it begun in a just one fell swoop. I think it was rather casual and bit by bit. I don't mean that it's going to take thousands of years or anything like that, it was probably a hundred years, but a hundred years is a lot of time in those cultures. And so we have some of the very early monuments in the pacific coast and in the central area of Kaminaljuyu where we have the beginnings of writing with iconographic signs but at the same time with some of the post fixes and affixes which begin to talk about verbal functions. So you have both the iconography and at the same time the spoken language in a written way and we can see that in monuments in the pacific coast and recently of course, what we are finding in places like San Bartolo or in Mirador where you have some type of early writing. I began to be interested in early writing years ago but not that early, it was Early Classic. But when you are studying Early Classic, what I did was to try go back rather than forward because the Early Classic inscriptions were difficult to understand; many of these signs seemed to be first of its-- their kind and so you had to go back and try to find other examples of those first signs and see if they meant something and where were they in the grammatical sanction of an inscription. Maya glyphs really are easy to read if you understand grammar. You may not understand the glyph itself but you understand the system and if you understand the system you are able to say well, this probably means such and such because it's in this order, and if we go back to these early inscriptions sometimes you don't find that order and then sometimes you do. So what I was trying to

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do was to find where it started in some grammatical sense. It becomes frustrating, primarily because there aren't that many that you can compare with, so you're looking at this and maybe you can find something somewhere there that's like it and whatever, but it's not like the typical Classic monuments that just everyone has some story and they're all the same in a sense. So it became a little frustrating and although I continued to be very interested in these things, there was a time when it was easier to go into the Classic inscriptions, you felt like you were doing something instead of being stuck in the mud of the early inscriptions. So in a sense people know that my interest and every time I come here there's always a crowd of people who want to know what I think about this inscription of the Early Classic that they have found or the Pre-Classic and, you know, I'm really interested and that's why I was asked to write a paper with Nikolai Grube on the early inscriptions, the Pre-Classic and Early Classic inscriptions for the exhibit in the Los Angeles County Museum.

### **The impact of the decipherment on the Maya of Guatemala.**

Q: In the broad sense what do you think that the fact that there has been a <inaudible> accomplished <inaudible> what do you think it means for Guatemalans for you as a Guatemalan and for the Maya of Guatemala, what do you think this an interesting piece of like information <inaudible>?

**Federico:** Of course you know, when we talk about Guatemala -- but then it's the same for the sections of Mexico where the Maya, Ancient Maya lived and in Belize and parts of El Salvador and Honduras -- for these countries and the people who live in these countries being able to read the ancient history is of tremendous value, whether you are a Maya which of course has more sense to them than the non-Maya, but even for the non-Maya the value of knowing the history of your country is of immense charge and value, because you get to understand things and know things, that even today have some present day meaning. Words that we use that are words that we can find in the inscriptions... of course whatever the Maya say have roots in those inscriptions. Whether you're a Mexican or a Belizean and speak English or Spanish or Kekchi or whatever, you have what I hope to be a further sense of community, not only within the countries but within the region so that it shouldn't be that difficult to say the Guatemalans and the Yucatecs and the Chiapanecos are part of a region that has— a sense of the same history of the same value systems of the same ideals or, you know, the things that make history. It's not just names or dates, it's the sense of who you are as part of something. And that to me is the value of what we are finding epigraphy and what we're being to able to read from those records. Plus the fact that now we can tie the epigraphic record to the physical monuments and inscriptions and buildings and so on that we see around us because even

## BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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though we have inscriptions and monuments and buildings and so on from say the Petén where you have written records, as opposed to the highlands where you don't have written records, you know that that building in the highland is the same as the building that you have in the Petén, in Yucatán, or a ball court, for example, or pyramid. The word for pyramid translated from one language to the other, *witz* to *huyu*, "*huyu*" means mountain, *witz* means mountain, they're the same thing. It's a pyramid, it's a sacred pyramid. And you have little mountains in Guatemala in the highlands that don't have written records that are called *huyus* and it's the same thing word, translation of a word into that language from *Witz*, which is the Mayan language in the Choltian inscriptions. So you get a sense of being part of the same community, and that's the important thing.