

## DAVID FREIDEL

*Interviewed April 9, 2005 in the Archives of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*



Archaeologist David Freidel has led research projects on Cozumel Island and Yaxuna in Mexico, Cerros in Belize, and most recently at El Peru (“Waka” in Maya) in Guatemala. He is a Professor of anthropology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. He is co-author with Linda Schele of *A Forest of Kings* and *Maya Cosmos*.

*In this interview he discusses:*

- [His experience as a student of Evon Vogt and Tatiana Proskouriakoff at Harvard](#)
- [The conflict between archaeology and epigraphy in Maya studies precipitated by the disputed dates in Pacal’s tomb at Palenque](#)
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## Interview transcript

### **His experience as a student of Evon Vogt and Tatiana Proskouriakoff at Harvard**

Q: Let’s go back to your time as a student at Harvard and a couple of the people that you got to know there and talk a little bit about their, you know, the impressions you had in the first hand of their work. Let’s talk about Evon Vogt.

**David Freidel:** I entered Harvard in the fall of 1964. I had really applied to two colleges, the University of Pennsylvania where I hoped to participate in the Tikal project, and Harvard University. My father taught at Harvard and prevailed upon me, since he was paying the bills, to go to Harvard, which I did happily.

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I was in Evon Vogt's freshman seminar on the Maya, and Vogt, from the first time I met him was, as he always was throughout his lifetime, kind, insightful, and a careful listener. He paid a lot of attention to students. And he was a great inspiration to me throughout my career after that.

The seminar really covered the waterfront of archeology, ethnohistory, ethnosience, social anthropology; everything that could be said about the Maya from the perspective of the discipline of anthropology was incorporated into the course. And this was entirely consistent with Vogt's whole approach to collaboration. He worked closely with Gordon Willey. Conceptually, they were good friends all of their careers and lives. But in addition, they thought together about what could be known about the Maya. And so, when Gordon Willey came as Bowditch professor with his extraordinary interest in settlement pattern, he and Vogt worked together on figuring out how Vogt could also study settlement pattern. And Vogt, from this early time, was interested in studying continuity and change over very long periods of time in the Maya world. And trying to discern what about the people in Chiapas he was studying might be attributable to deep ancestral understandings and beliefs. This informed me in ways that have never left me.

I was trained as a structural anthropologist by him and by David Mayberry Lewis. And I wanted to bring a kind of paleoethnography to the Maya as an archeologist. I thought about this, and then I dropped it and went off to southwest Asia. I returned after two years in the Peace Corps, in Iran. Prepared to do a dissertation on Iranian archeology, but I was unable to get a permit to do an excavation. So, in the fall of my first year of graduate school in 1971, I jumped ship at the end of Gordon Willey's famous seminar on Maya archeology, and went into Mesoamerica as a profession.

I met Tanya Proskouriakoff through Gordon Willey at the end of that seminar, because I had written a long paper about the *danzantes* in Oaxaca proposing that they were not captives slain but rather shamans dancing. And I got very interested in the whole notion that ecstatic states might be represented in the iconography of the Mesoamerican people. So, Gordon invited me to lunch with Tanya at his favorite Chinese restaurant, behind the Harvard Coop, where always took students and colleagues. And I was very longhaired at the time. I was certainly in my hippie mode. So I stopped and bought a bright silk handkerchief and wrapped it around my head like a rock star from the 60's and strode in. They did not bat an eye! And the conversation was wide-ranging. I remember walking back with Ms. Proskouriakoff talking about Darwinian evolution. She was so prepared to engage in conversation with students on any topic. So, she agreed to take me as a student in the spring.

I took Evon Vogt's seminar, and I took a readings course with her on iconography. And she let me pore over the photographs of Maya sculpture in her laboratory. Day after day

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I would come in and just stare at them, trying to teach myself what I could see. And then I would talk to her, seated across her small desk where she was working on the Jades from the Cenote of Sacrifice.

She had a very bright gaze. She was very, very intelligent. And she worked very hard not to anticipate what people wanted to say to her, in case somebody said something that surprised her. So, she was a very good listener also, and a good teacher. I listened to her talk to her other students, many of them who have become very famous in Mesoamerican studies. And she was like that with all of us.

She tried to get me to focus on animals and naturalistic imagery. And I went back and read Spinden, and looked at natural animals, but my real interest was not in animals but in grotesques. I just loved the extraordinary combinations that the Maya had created in their art. And so, despite her best efforts, I wrote about that, and in a kind of perfunctory way covered natural animals. And she was not pleased with the result. She said, "David, you have some very good ideas but you have a very undisciplined way of dealing with these matters. You must learn to be systematic." And I took that advice to heart. I thought, I'd better do that. I didn't study hieroglyphics with her. I know she was working on the matter. But I was really looking to train as an iconographer, not as an epigrapher. She was working with what she called structural analysis of the glyphs, which was essentially a positional analysis that would allow her to identify what we would later call grammatical elements. Linda Schele would pick up this theme with her dissertation on the verbs. So, it was fundamental contributions that she was making to the study of epigraphy.

But I was really paying attention, rather, to the iconography. And I went on to train with Gordon Willey, in his office. I didn't train in the field with him. I wanted to write my dissertation on something like Maya religion and ideology. Well, my colleague, Arthur Demarest ended up writing about ideology quite directly, and I ended up working on Cozumel with Jerry Sabloff instead, which was an excellent field experience and an important discipline to me.

So, it was a while before I came back to the ideas that I had discussed with Ms. Proskouriakoff. But one of them I recall. She liked to sit in the smoker. She had her own little ashtray. She was a very careful smoker, not to be messy and not to get in anybody's way. But she smoked incessantly. And we would sit in the smoker with her sometimes, and have a conversation. And I remember writing a paper for Vogt in that second semester of graduate school, on shamanism in the Maya area. A paper I still own. And I became convinced that the Maya in antiquity must have had such religious practitioners. So I asked her, I said, "Ms. Proskouriakoff, I think that we could get at this issue, because it's there in the high art." This capacity of people to talk with ancestors or

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gods, ancestor worship, was clearly important, as my fellow student Joyce Marcus was pursuing at the time, working with Ms. Proskouriakoff also. And I said, “These people must be appealing to the masses in some way with this understanding of the world that people like Vogt and his colleagues are documenting so clearly in the modern Maya case. The modern Maya peasants have this religion and the ancient Maya kings and queens or whoever they are have this religion, there must be a connection!” And she said, “David, it’s an interesting approach. I’m not sure how you would ever go about empirically demonstrating it.” Well, of course, that was before the decipherment. And a great deal has happened since then, and we can talk about such matters and do so regularly now.

Q: Going back to Vogt, what was his genetic hypothesis, and how does that end up applying to the effort to decipher this script, understand the ancient Maya but more specifically to understand what they’re saying in their writing.

**David Freidel:** Vogt was very interested in the connection between the contemporary Maya and their pre-Colombian ancestors. And he conceived of these matters theoretically. Not just in empirical terms. The theory he proposed was a genetic model. And by that he meant that there must have been some fundamental cultural understanding that had endured over long periods of time from the ancient Maya to the modern, that if we could pursue these matters through such issues as the Diaspora of Mayan languages, through other cultural traits that they had in antiquity, we might be able to back-stream from contemporary observation, by analogy, to the pre-Colombian Maya in rather rich and detailed ways that were really regarded as improbable by most archeologists who used the direct historical approach, but did not see the evidence coming from contemporary ethnography as really applying in any direct way to the pre-Colombian world.

So the genetic hypothesis was really his way of couching this problem to the general field. And the particulars of it probably have not stood the test of time. But the generalities of it, I still believe firmly, do work. He had some wonderfully skeptical graduate students, especially Robert Wasserstrom, but also to some degree Jan Rus, both of them fine historians who challenged this proposition, and went back and came up with very clear evidence of enormous changes coming to the Chiapas Maya as a result of their experience with the early Christian friars, some of whom were broad theoreticians in their own right.

So, there’s no question that it’s a complicated history of five centuries of acculturation to the Europeans. But I am convinced, and I remain of the opinion, that it’s a working probability that the Maya of today still hold to some beliefs that were part of their understanding before the arrival of the Europeans, just as their languages are descendant languages from the pre-Colombian period.

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Q: Give me one more take on what Tanya was like. What did she look like, and how did she dress, and what was it like engaging that personal conversation with her about these kinds of topics?

**David Freidel:** When I knew Tanya Proskouriakoff, “Miss Proskouriakoff” to me and other students like me always, she was in middle age. She was at the top of her scholarly work and she was writing a great monograph on the [Chichen Itzá] Cenote of Sacrifice jades.

She was a diminutive person. She was petite. She was slightly frail, but she had an extraordinary inner strength, a strength of will, of character, a clarity of mind that made her seem very strong to all of us who had the privilege of working with her. We did not think of her then as a frail person. We thought of her as a person who had, kind of like a great supernova, collapsed down on herself and become extraordinarily compact. And so her presence was large, always. At least for us who worked with her and revered her.

And she favored amethyst. It was a color that I think she had brought from her childhood, but it worked very well with the color of her hair and eyes and skin. So she always liked to wear a little jewelry. And I had the impression always that she had been extraordinarily attractive as a young woman. A beautiful woman. And wondered what it would have been like to know her as a beautiful young woman and came to the conclusion that she would have been just as tough-minded and strong as she always was and, therefore, quite a formidable challenge for any man who might be interested in her!

Q: Thank you. I want to talk a little bit about her work – there was a period in the 50’s when she was working on Maya sculpture. You had described to me how her work would be 3 x 5 cards that she sorted, and we actually located some of those cards. Could you describe how those helped her work out the sequence of Maya dates that sort of led into her work [on the pattern of dates at Piedras Negras] in 1960?

**David Freidel:** In Tanya Proskouriakoff’s efforts to educate me as an iconographer, she took me and showed me in her office this enormous file of index cards on which she had carefully drawn every conceivable element from the corpus of carved stone stelae known at that time. And that was a substantial corpus. She had all of the really fine photographs as prints, and I used that file, and I studied every one of those photographs. But she tried to explain to me how an iconographer goes about seeing elements by showing me the elements that had herself drawn for her landmark 1950 monograph on the corpus of Maya stelae at that time. And her goal in that work was multifarious, but certainly central to it was the effort to seriate the carved stones that did not have dates left on them, so that they could be positioned between stelae that did have dates on them. So it was a comprehensive attribute analysis of all of important features of the iconographic program

on carved stone monuments, as well as being an effort to show a seriation of all the monuments including the undated monuments along with the dated monuments.

What people should go back and read, even now, I think especially now, is the conclusion to that 1950 monograph, because it is a contemplation of what Maya were doing with carved stelae. And it really poses the fundamental question, which I still find fascinating, about the writing system of the Maya, which is why the monumental sculptural tradition, which Gordon Willey referred to, partly tongue and cheek as “the stela cult”, why that phenomenon was not broadly distributed in the northern Maya Lowlands or on the eastern coast of the Caribbean or then southern highlands in areas where we know that people were literate. Why were they not carving stone monuments in this way? And she addressed this matter. She addressed it stylistically, she addressed it intellectually in ways that still challenge, me at least, today. So that’s a work of enduring focus and significance in my life.

### **The conflict between archaeology and epigraphy in Maya studies precipitated by the disputed dates in Pacal’s tomb at Palenque**

Q: Let’s move forward in time. Alberto Ruz discovers Pacal’s tomb, dates him to be a man in his 40’s or 50. In 1973, at the first Mesa Redonda and after, Floyd and Linda and Peter say that the man in there is approximately 80 years old, and this begins a rift, and I’d really like you to talk about what the consequences of that are, and if you could mentioned how in the last couple years that’s finally been resolved, at least scientifically been resolved.

**David Freidel:** I met Alberto Ruz when he came to Cozumel Island to visit the Harvard Arizona project there. And I was immediately struck by the extraordinary presence of this man. He is very tall, extraordinarily handsome, gray-haired at that time, with his small son in tow. So, he was a late-blooming parent to that particular man and very gentle with the boy. But he was an extraordinarily charismatic individual. Anyone who met him, I think would know that.

So here was a man of exceptional conviction who had made the most important discovery of a tomb in the history of Maya research, was a hero in Mexico for this effort and revered generally in the field. So that when in the course of the first Mesa Redondas it became clear that he deeply questioned the decipherment process as it was being unfolded at the time, and could not accept the date of the death of Pacal as given by Floyd Lounsbury, this caused a profound disturbance in the whole process. People had, in their own minds, to take sides. Were they going to trust the authority of an extraordinary archeologist or this newly unfolding process of decipherment being carried

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out by people who were, for intents and purposes, amateurs to that field? Floyd Lounsbury was an expert in many fields, but he had come to the Maya field late in this process.

So, it was a hard time by all accounts. Now, I wasn't present to see this unfold. I heard it from others after the fact. But I can say this, that my collaborator later, Linda Schele, told me in no uncertain terms, in unequivocal terms, that she had never felt that her job was to criticize Tanya Proskouriakoff, who basically sided with Alberto Ruz on questioning and challenging the chronicle quality of dating. She worshiped Tanya Proskouriakoff as an extraordinary giant intellectually in her field. The frustration that Linda felt was that somehow she was finding herself at odds with people with whom she really wished to collaborate, and to work with on the process of decipherment and the bringing of the decipherment into the larger enterprise of Maya studies. She did not wish to be on the wrong side of that argument. But she believed Floyd Lounsbury, and she believed the other people she was working with, and she believed the dates were chronicle. And she was right. And Ms. Proskouriakoff in this particular was wrong. That did not, in any way, mitigate the extraordinary brilliance of her contribution. But it was an unfortunate unfolding of events because it would have made an enormous difference if the field had been united in its pursuit of the decipherment as, in the last analysis, a useful window into ancient Maya life and history.

Q: Tanya makes a decision to back Ruz. Several of her students sort of side with Tanya. You described a kind of rift that develops between two sets of people, all extremely intelligent and bright scholars.. Can you talk about how that happened. And also the way Tanya could have, because of this, sort of ends up at the first Dumbarton Oaks mini-conference – the Palenque group, what was referred to derisively as “that Palenque group”, Linda, Peter, Floyd, Dave Kelley, she said to them .”How do you know this stuff is history?” She was the one who proved it's history!

**David Freidel:** There really was a rift between people who questioned the chronicle content of hieroglyphics and the people who believed in the chronicle content, beginning with the birth and death dates of Pacal the Great at Palenque, because that's where things started. But Tanya Proskouriakoff ironically was writing, in her own way, a history, an ancient history of the Maya based upon her understanding of matters at the time. And she had, through her own contribution in the 60's, established the historical hypothesis that Linda Schele and others were embracing so enthusiastically as they pursued a decipherment.

It's hard to know what would have happened if this rift had not occurred. But it got worse and not better over the course of the 70's and into the early 80's. And those people who were on one side of this rift really felt very strongly about the rift, and about the

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people on the other side of the rift. I recall discussing this in the basement of Dumbarton Oaks, when I was a fellow, there with Gordon Willey, and I believe it was the only time that I ever actually raised my voice, not vocally, but in principal to this man whom I cherished deeply. And we were talking about Linda Schele and Tanya Proskouriakoff and I said, "Linda Schele supports the publication of Tanya's last book with the University of Texas press. She has not opposed it. Gordon, Tanya was a stubborn woman and it's unfortunate that she did not accept the process of the decipherment as it unfolded!"

And he was really taken aback that I would say this. And I felt very strongly about it because, as an archeologist who always wanted to get inside of the ancient history of the Maya, to be the paleoethnographer that Vogt was quietly cultivating in me, I wanted the decipherment to be true. But beyond that, I was now talking to people like Linda Schele and Peter Matthews about the decipherment, and I was convinced that it did work and that those who were acidulously opposing it were wrong, were just fundamentally wrong. And I believe to the present day that they were fundamentally wrong.

Q: We get up to the period of the Blood of Kingship and your opening address there. To talk about that, and about the notion that there would be a paradigm shift, and, of course, what that is and what it involved and how it played out in the Mayanist community.

**David Freidel:** Linda Schele had many collaborators and I was one of them. Mary Miller was another. And Linda Schele put together the Blood of Kings show. She was invited to do so by the Fort Worth Kimbell Art Museum. The Kimbell was blackballed in Mesoamerica, because it owned – and still owns – a hieroglyphically inscribed stela from the side of El Peru, ancient Waka. And the Cleveland Art Museum, was also blackballed because it owns another stela from that same site, ironically, a site I am presently researching. So I wish those stela were back. But they are not.

The show was designed by Linda and her collaborators, a brilliant photographer in Justin Kerr, and Mary Miller, extraordinary scholar in her own right. And the show was to exemplify the connections between the hieroglyphic writing system, the art, and the artifacts. And it was a *tour de force* effort, both as a written document and as a show, and I was pleased and privileged to be part of the seminar that followed the Blood of Kings show. The keynote speaker was Michael Coe, who had been a champion of the decipherment as practiced by the Palenque group and very much involved with the whole process of it. And he spoke eloquently, but Linda wanted more. And I was the final speaker. I was supposed to be the discussant. We all had papers so to speak. But I recall spending two days thinking about what I was going to say so that I wasn't just reading my paper, which was a paper incidentally called, "Through the Looking Glass" 'cause I was talking about artifacts speaking back to archeologists. In that paper, which I

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deviated from quite completely, at the end of my paper I raised my hand like a Maya king on a hieroglyphically inscribed stela, and I called upon Tanya Proskouriakoff and Jay Eric Thompson and Morley and all the greats of our fields saying, "I wish you could be here to witness this extraordinarily magical time when we are understanding and deciphering the glyphs that you loved so much for so long." And I said, "I'm sure that you're here in spirit." And Linda wept. She said, "Freidel, you made me cry." And as she got up to the podium, and we had a nice panel after that, just talking. Andrew Stone came afterwards and said, "Freidel, you're just one more preacher up there, talking like a great evangelist!" I said, "Well, I know. But that's the way I felt about it at the time." The Blood of Kings show was an extraordinary triumph.

Q: -- Could you talk about your notion it was a paradigm shift in the understanding of the Maya, and what a paradigm shift means?

**David Freidel:** Okay. I think as soon as I started working with Linda Schele I realized that the hieroglyphic decipherment was a paradigm shift, as Thomas Kuhn had written about paradigms in science in his famous essay on the Copernican Revolution. I was trained in this understanding as an archeologist of the 60's and 70's, a "new archeologist", a "scientist as an archeologist". So I understood what a paradigm shift was. And Linda and I talked about this quite a lot in the course of our collaboration, because she had not heard this from other people so much as she was hearing it from me.

By paradigm shift I meant that this would change everything. It would change all of the basic understandings we had about what it was possible to know about the Maya, because moving from an ahistorical society to an historical society would just be profound. And that furthermore, I knew, that there would be great resistance to this by people who had intellectual investment in an ahistorical interpretation of ancient Maya civilization. The theoreticians that I trained with, and were of my generation, were writing extraordinarily well about the Maya collapse, about the origins of the Maya, using both ethnographic analogy, direct historical analogy, and the conceptual tools of the scientific revolution in archeology that had started in the 60's and was continuing in the 70's. So they were writing wonderful stuff. But they were writing about the Maya as an ahistorical people. And I knew this was not going to hold. It would not stand as the decipherment unfolded. And I knew that they would resist. That there were people who were not only profoundly skeptical of the possibility but who would defend their own understanding of the Maya as ahistorical. And they did.

The paradigm shift in Maya hieroglyphic decipherment pitted a group of very able archeologists who saw the Maya as an ahistorical people, fundamentally, against the opportunity of seeing the Maya as an historical people where you could integrate ancient history into the archeological models. This now, incidentally, is called the conjunctive

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approach after Robert Sharer and William Fash's terming of it. But in the early days it didn't have a name. It was simply the archeologists and "those ... epigraphers". The pause being there for various explicatives that might go in either direction!

But the frustration that I felt as an archeologist was, I wanted that information, that insight, that would come with a decipherment. I wanted to harness that information to our understanding of the ancient Maya. And I thought we could. And so I sided with the people who were doing the decipherment. And I found myself, unfortunately, pitted against a group of archeologists who were basically profoundly skeptical that the decipherment could work. And then their fallback position was that, well, if the Maya really were writing, then we can't believe what they were saying, because they were saying it for purposes of propaganda and myth, and not for purposes of chronicle.

Well, they were wrong. The Maya, of course, talk about what they want to talk about as any great civilization describes what it wants to talk about. But they were not lying about dates. They were not lying about the fundamental ideas or events that occurred. They do have chronicle in their writing. We know that now. But I always believed that they would. I recall Linda Schele at the New Orleans Society for American Archeology meetings in the middle 80's getting up and reviewing the smashed and tattered fragments of hieroglyphic inscriptions at Copán from the early classic saying, "These inscriptions prove that the Maya, in the time of the founding of the dynasty here, were in fact writing. I predict that the founder of the dynasty at Copán was not a mythological person but a real historical individual and that we will be able to see that." And she lived long enough to see the discovery of the tombs in the acropolis and the evidence, that I think is pretty compelling, that we have the bones of the founder of the dynasty of Copán.

Q: She didn't live long enough to see it, but don't we now have proof that they were right about the man in the Temple of the Inscriptions?

**David Freidel:** Yes. The matter of the controversy surrounding Pacal's bones was still unfolding when Linda died. But that matter is now pretty decisively put aside. And I think it will never be used again as a means of being skeptical about Maya hieroglyphic writing. But it's really important, I think, for people today who are looking at this paradigm controversy to understand that while extraordinary epigraphers of today, like David Stuart, can claim that the battle is over and that the decipherment is won, the reality has not sunk in with the majority of archeologists, who are still working in the Maya area with enormous skepticism about what the decipherment might provide to them as they try to understand the archeological record of the pre-Colombian Maya. That bridge can only be built through practice in the field, by archeologists who used the hieroglyphic decipherment in ancient history talking to our archeologists who don't. Over and over again.

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So part of my job as an archeologist today is to stand with my archeologists who are excavating, over and over again, telling them the ancient history as we know it right now of the site we're excavating, of the other sites that are connected to this site. And they hear it from me not as an epigrapher, because I'm not. I'm an iconographer and an archeologist. They hear it from me because I believe it to be relevant to their understanding in the future of the Maya. This really is the only historical pre-Colombian civilization in the new world.

Q: This paradigm shift that you were talking about was a painful one and produced a lot of animosities and difficulties. But I think you said to me before that every paradigm shift is painful. That it's like a war, because people have so much invested in the ideas that they were born with. Could you talk about the painfulness of the process?

**David Freidel:** I sided with the epigraphers who were undertaking the decipherment. I found myself, as a result, on the other side of the paradigm struggle from many dear friends of many years acquaintance and that was a painful thing for me. I didn't wish to be alienated from my friends and colleagues in this way. And I didn't feel that my work was strange when I talked about the hieroglyphic decipherment in conjunction with archeology. But it was a reconciliation that is still unfolding in some ways.

I recall standing in the middle of a very large convention of the Society for American Archeology right after *A Forest of Kings* had been published. And I was standing more or less alone. Peter Matthews came roaring past me at one point with Robert Sharer and they were talking about El Peru. They were getting ready to try to go in there. So it wasn't that they were ignoring me at all but they were off doing it. They were doing the conjunctive approach. So I was standing there alone waiting to talk to anybody and Jeremy Sabloff, with whom I had trained in the field, came up and spoke to me at length. And another colleague of ours, who was really very much on the other side of this paradigm dispute, tried to draw Jerry away and Jerry would not. He would ignore him and continue to talk to me. And it's a kindness that I remember very fondly.

Q: Thank you. Part of the argument that was made against the decipherment was that it was unscientific, that it was just epiphenomenal material, but also that these decipherers were changing their minds all the time. I think you made the point that this actually shows how scientific it was, that maybe it was the most self-correcting area of Maya studies. Can you talk about that in a little bit?

**David Freidel:** Matters really came to a head in the paradigm dispute over the hieroglyphic decipherment in the late 80's and early 90's. And in that context the people who were opposed to the hieroglyphic decipherment were claiming that those of us who were embracing it were moving beyond the pale of acceptable scientific scholarship.

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And they articulated this in several ways. First, they said if you accept the content of the decipherment you are being gulled by ancient propagandists. That was one line of defense. The second was, how can you trust a methodology that brings such change, constant change, to its content. And I thought, in bewilderment, how can people who claim to be scientists complain about a method that is so powerful that it can rapidly disconfirm hypotheses? Here we are in a field where people are still arguing about ceramics in a way that will never be decisively ended, because there's no way to decisively disconfirm hypotheses, and they're looking at a method that *can* do this, discard ideas in favor of better ones, and saying it's not scientific!

I said, "The decipherment is anchored in natural language. Natural language is uncompromising. It is what it is. It is an encoding of natural language in such a way that either you're right or you're wrong. You can be equivocal about the content of any literature. You can interpret it all you want. But the *reading* of it is not subject to speculation. It's subject to decisive discernment." And I said "Nothing in archeology is this decisive. This is the most scientific method being used in the Maya world!"

So I found it a great irony. Well, I think that my colleagues in archeology, many of them, are still skeptical about this method. But the reality is they don't study hieroglyphic decipherment. And, therefore, they don't understand why the method is as powerful as it is. And the epigraphers, on the other hand, have a hard time persuading the archeologists, often because they don't spend as much time working as archeologists as they do working as epigraphers. So the divide between epigraphy and archeology will remain. There will always be specialists in both. But the conversation between them, I think, is becoming increasingly productive. As archeologists who choose to work with the decipherment collaborate with epigraphers, and teach their students to collaborate with epigraphers, I think we're probably well on the way to an historical archeology.

Q: Today if you go and start a project in the Maya area, isn't it increasingly common that there will be an epigrapher on board, that the archeologist will work – aren't there a number of sites where that's happening now?

**David Freidel:** We have enough epigraphers now that they are regularly being recruited to work on archeology projects, which are multidisciplinary by normal practice. We have all kinds of specialists that we like to include. But epigraphers are, in fact, on board in many of the major projects that are being carried out presently in the area of the Maya world where public inscriptions are a fundamental feature. In other parts of the Maya world, such as the northern lowlands or even in parts of Belize, it's not quite so critical that you have an epigrapher available to you to read and discern what you've got in hieroglyphic inscriptions, because you don't run into them very often. But where people are working in the southern lowlands, as I am now, you must have an epigrapher because

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you're constantly encountering evidence that is epigraphic. And if you can't interpret what that evidence is, you can't design your search problems immediately for your field. You can't make course correction any better than you can if you were trying to do archeology without a ceramicist.

Q: One other part of this dispute between archeologists and epigraphers had to do with the use of unprovenanced material. More than 50 percent of the known Maya texts are on pottery. And a lot of other texts are on things of problematic provenance. And that is the Maya literature. And a lot of archeologists had a problem with the fact that people were dealing with this. Could you talk about that?

**David Freidel:** The role of looted material in Maya archeology is central to understanding both the paradigm struggle between the people who believed in the decipherment and those who did not and understanding, more generally, the ethical positioning of archeologists in this very complicated arena.

All of the great museums of ancient civilization have artifacts from the Maya civilization that actually should be repatriated. And this includes all of the museums where people work who have defended the right to exclude hieroglyphically deciphered monuments that are looted, or objects that are looted. So it's a very murky area all together morally. The people who were reading Maya hieroglyphics did not confine themselves to objects that were found in good provenance. They read everything they could get they could get their hands on, to try to get as large of corpus of hieroglyphics into their heads and into their work as possible. And this included a very large number of polychrome painted Maya vases of the classic period, which had been looted out of Maya tombs in sites all over the Maya world. Devastating those sites in many ways.

So, the ethics of reading these monuments, especially the hieroglyphically inscribed looted objects, was a big issue in the 80's. And there were two shows in 1986: one show, *The Blood of Kings*, which used hieroglyphically inscribed looted objects in the show, but very carefully vetted, I would have to say, by the art historians and the epigraphers. And the other show, which opened at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which was a show that had loans from Belize and Mexico and from Guatemala, countries that would not loan to *The Blood of Kings* show. So the major pieces from those countries were included in the American Museum of Natural History show and they were great. The *Maya Treasures* show. But, for reasons that I only know from hearsay and therefore I will not speculate on, pieces in that show were included that were fakes! This was identified immediately by the people who attended the opening of the show, much to the extraordinary consternation of everybody involved in that show. By the time it came to Dallas, where it came, to the Dallas Museum, the fakes had been called out and were all in one room illustrating fakery.

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But the reality is, those pieces had been included in the show. So, here was a perplexing circumstance. You've had *The Blood of Kings* show, which had real looted objects in it. And then you had the American Museum of Natural History *Treasures* show, which had fake looted objects in it. Objects that people had bought that were unprovenanced, but turned out not to be real. And it really was a very peculiar counterpoint in 1986 that illustrated the perplexity surrounding the hieroglyphic decipherment.

But the reality is, that *real* looted objects are still central to the corpus of Maya hieroglyphic writing. So that the last meeting of the Maya convention in Austin, thematically dealt with painted pottery as decided upon by David Stuart, who is one of the remarkable new generation of decipherers.

### **His collaborations with Linda Schele**

Q: Let's go back to your first encounters with Linda, back when you were working in Cerros I believe, and you guys got together, had some conversations about this, and then did a series of papers that eventually led to books. What was your first impression of her, and then what was it like working with her? You described to me that you collaborated long-distance and then there was, on *Forest of Kings*, this marathon session in Dallas during an ice storm that you had the first experience of working together for a long period of time. Describe her and what she was like, and what it was like to work with her.

**David Freidel:** I came to iconography, the study of material symbol systems of the Maya, I came to Maya art, through personal encounter at Cerros. I excavated a building there, 5C Second, which was beautifully preserved. And had to study the art. I had to make sense of it. So I started teaching myself about Maya art and I sent out my preliminary papers to the art historians I respected, George Kubler and Linda Schele among them. And I got kind comments back from many people telling me what they liked and what they didn't like about what I was doing with the iconography of the site of Cerros. And Linda was especially interested.

Now, I had seen Linda. That's why I sent her a paper. I saw her in action at a meeting in Austin that I attended, just by accident, with a man named Grant Jones, a colleague of mine, an ethnohistorian of the Maya. And she was extraordinary. She was charismatic. I was sitting next to Vickie Bricker and watching this extraordinary performance and saying, my goodness. I've never seen anybody who could be so captivating in the Maya field, in person.

So, I sent the papers to her, and then she wrote back and said, "David, you're right for all the wrong reasons." Actually she called me on the telephone. "We have to talk. I'm

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coming up with my students.” I said, “Whe?.” “Oh, let’s do it soon. Next weekend?” “All right.”

So she came up to my house with a few students in tow, and we looked at slides of the imagery from Cerros. And we argued about it and we talked about it. And we went off to lunch and we drew on our napkins and I realized that Linda was inviting me to collaborate with her. She was a preeminent collaborator. She collaborated with everybody she could. And I was thrilled because I thought, now I’m really gonna make some headway here. And I did. I drove down to Austin to work with her periodically after that.

I was invited to go to Harvard University to go on a job talk for the Bowditch Chair. And I was terrified. I was young and I didn’t think my work was up to this. And I had never been frightened of giving a talk before, especially not at Harvard where I had trained. But going back to talk for the Bowditch Chair was overwhelming to me. So I went down to Linda and I said, “Linda, you gotta help me. I gotta think of something that I can say that’s really big, that’s really compelling, important work.” So, we sat and we talked, and we talked and we sat, and we sat and we talked – and Linda was an alcoholic. And she was still drinking at that time. And so we drank enormous quantities of Scotch, well into the night, over and over. Working on her old clunker of a handmade computer put together by her husband, David. And in the middle of the night, I came up with the model that I was going to use and she wrote it out on the computer and she turned around and looked me and said, “David, have you ever said this before?” I said, “No. Let’s just keep going. I don’t know where I’m going yet. But I’m getting there.” And it was a structural analysis of Maya evolution that showed the relationship between culture change on the one hand as seen through art, through writing, through all of the media that we had, and social change as seen through settlement patterns and adaptive dynamics and all the things that the new archeologists had proposed. And I said, “These are different kinds of change because people filter out from their world the kinds of things that they’re interested in, and that’s what they respond to. Not to what’s really going on out there in the social world.” So, there’s a dialectic between social and cultural change. And it breaks every once in a while when the realty is not in concert with the social circumstances. And when those breaks happen, great, great revolutionary changes happen.

And this punctuated equilibrium model that I worked with on her, we called the Cosmogram. And we presented it to Gillett Griffin over dinner and he said, “Yeah. Come and get a paper on this at Princeton and we’ll have a conference.” And so we did. The paper was presented in ’82. It didn’t come out ‘til ’88. Actually it was really quite influential for a period of time, theoretically. Probably the most important thing I’ve

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every written theoretically. Didn't get me the Bowditch Chair! But it started our collaboration.

So Linda and I worked on articles after that, and basically I'd prod her. I'd write a first draft and say, "Linda, fix this." And she would. And then she'd put her name on it. Sometimes she'd fix it so much I'd say, "Okay. You have to be the senior author on this paper." But then she said, "Okay. Well, let's do *The Blood of Kings*, you'll be a seminar speaker, and then she collaborated with Mary Miller and I was sad because she didn't want to write the book with me, she wanted to write it with Mary. But then, she said, "Okay. I'll write the next book with you." So, when she had a chance to write *A Forest of Kings*, she said, "David, okay, here's the book." I said, "Terrific." And that was the book we wrote together.

She taught me how to write on the computer, so we could write back and forth. And she taught me the word processor Nota Bene she was using. And she came up and we wrote the first introductory chapter together in my kitchen and dining room in the middle of a ice storm with my two-and-a-half-year-old daughter wandering around beneath my feet and then I'd take her out run with her outdoors a little bit and then we'd come back in and Linda would cook for us. And my wife was off in the field in Jamaica. So, we wrote. And we wrote for days and days and days. And by God, it was good. It was really good. Just writing through each other's prose and so what we got used to was – our collaboration was based upon complete violation of the boundaries between each other as authors. Absolutely. So that I never looked back when I sent her a draft. I only looked at the draft that Linda sent to me, and then she never looked back. She'd just go forward from the draft that I wrote. We'd go through 10 or 12 incarnations of this. And our co-writer, Joy Parker, a great writer, laundered our prose and when she didn't understand something, it became very clear that we had screwed up somehow. And we'd go back and rewrite it so that Joy understood it. And the cybernetics of it were that Joy taught us to write. She taught us how to write in accessible prose. And

I added something new in *Forest of Kings*, new to me. Something I always wanted to write, which were vignettes. I said, "Well, Jerry Sabloff's written vignettes. Little ones." And then Gordon Willey wrote a vignette. At the School of American Research he read a vignette about being the old king of Seibal when all these young whippersnappers, traitors are coming in and the times are changing and the time of the collapse is coming. And he read it to us all at a meeting there, small conference, and it was beautiful. And we all just sort of went, "Wow." So Jerry and I arranged to publish it for his retirement party. And we distributed all the copies there. So that was a vignette. I said, "This has got to be okay." So I wrote vignettes and then Linda sort of scratched her head, "What are you doing? What are these vignettes? Why are you writing this?"

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I was trying to make the book accessible. I wanted a public audience for this book. So I wrote a vignette about war between Tikal and Uaxactun in a chapter that Linda had written the first draft for. And I left it on the computer in the morning. Joy and I and Linda were working together and she went down into her office, which was kind of like a starship pod and she was still puttering around and sleepy and she looked at the computer and I just waited. Joy and I just held our breath. And then she said, explicative deleted, "David, you don't know anything about writing about a Maya battle." And I hear the keys crackling away. I said, "I've got her. I've hooked her. Now she's gonna write vignettes."

She wrote three vignettes in the next week and a half. She was firing these vignettes for her chapters at me. I'm going, "Ay, ay. I've gotta do something with these." And so she bought into the idea.

It got us in real trouble with our colleagues. They thought we were violating the sensibilities of good scholarship in her field by writing these vignettes. And that really hurt us both. We did not want people to think that we were somehow untethering ourselves from empirical evidence. 'Cause we were not. That's why half the book was footnotes and half the book was main text. But we caught a lot of heat for those vignettes. And, at the same time great scholars from other fields like Johannes Wilbert came to Linda and he said, "Linda, you really screwed up my schedule. Here I was obligated to write this article and I open up *A Forest of Kings*, I find myself in chapter 4 in the middle of the vignette and I can't put the book down. So it ruined my whole day. I had to sit there and read the book. And now I have to talk to you." Which he did. And Johannes Wilbert is one of the preeminent scholars of social anthropology in Latin America, one of the greats of our field. So it was awesome us to recruit to our side people of his caliber. So the vignettes were not a catastrophe, in intellectual terms. They were a mixed blessing. And I'm still very proud of them. And I wrote a whole series of vignettes for our second book together, *Maya Cosmos*, which were never published. So they're the lost vignettes, which I keep in my computer.

Linda and I started seriously collaborating in the early '80s. I was at Dumbarton Oaks. As an alcoholic, she came out of the closet, went into rehab. I corresponded with her intensely during the year I was in Dumbarton Oaks, in 1982, wrote several papers on iconography and corresponded with her. When I came back, she really made it impossible for me not to attend the Maya Meetings [in Austin] and start to learn the rudiments of epigraphy. Because she paid me to come down and be a speaker about various topics, I could explain to my family, "Well, I've really got to go. This is an opportunity to learn and also to make a little money." I went down regularly in the middle '80s. In the context of those meetings, I was introduced to Maya hieroglyphic decipherment.

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So my first meeting that I went to as a novice decipherer, working on the text from Palenque, which everybody did, I was there with Ray Matheny and Richard Hansen. Richard was a graduate student at the time and Ray Matheny was one of his teachers. We had a wonderful time figuring out for ourselves the structural analysis of Maya hieroglyphics. It was a watershed moment for all of us because all of us became convinced, really intuitively at that point, that the decipherment did work, and that we would commit to understanding the decipherment and working with epigraphic information from then on. So, we all kind of testified in our various ways at the end of that workshop, that long intensive experience.

Subsequently, I came back. I kept lecturing about my work on iconography, architectural design. I basically worked out the rudiments of an article that Linda Schele and I would publish in *American Anthropologist* on pre-classic kingship. That article was controversial when it came out. Many of my colleagues in archeology accused me of “speaking in tongues,” speaking about very strange things. Linda put her name on it, and put her imprimatur on it, to support me and also because it was relevant. That article, I’m still very proud of. It’s an outline of a methodology for incorporating iconography, archeology, and epigraphy into interpretations of important issues like rulership. We really worked out in our own minds in this period, the ‘80s, the idea of the divine kingship. Linda was working on this with other collaborators, but I was part of that process and very proud to be.

The Maya Meetings were an extraordinarily effervescent experience. I convinced a wealthy individual in Dallas to support the Maya meetings. After the *Blood of Kings* show, she asked me what I wanted to have supported. I said, “These meetings.” That infusion of money really allowed the meetings to expand into the form that they took in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. I was made the president of the Maya Hieroglyphic Meetings in Austin because I had helped find that money. I held that title sporadically until very recently. I don’t think I am anymore, but nobody’s fired me yet, so I don’t know!

Q: Can you describe the meetings? What goes on there? Why is it exciting?

**David Friedel:** The Maya Meetings in Austin during the 1980s were a tremendously exciting place to be. All kinds of people showed up for them. People who were scholars in the Maya field came to find out more - Michael Coe, E. Willis Andrews, distinguished scholars. People from all walks of life showed up who were just fascinated by the Maya and of course by Linda Schele, who was a charismatic, booming presence from the podium. Every time she was up at the podium, one couldn’t help but be affected by her presence. She was just a remarkable speaker, and she was very open. She would take comments from the audience constantly. She would be interrupted, then she would go forward.

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Great discoveries might come out. You would hear extraordinary explicatives come out from Linda if they were really important discoveries. People had to record these meetings, by videotape and by audio tape, in order to not lose any of the information that people were brainstorming from the audience up to the podium. It was a great exchange. The people I met at these meetings, the amateurs, were very welcome there by Linda and by everybody else. Linda always thought of herself as an amateur. She felt people coming with fresh perspectives might have new ideas that people had to take seriously. She could be a very cruel critic sometimes. I mean, people would get kind of yelled at in the enthusiasm of the moment and be devastated, but she really never meant anybody harm in this way. It was difficult. It was like she was a force of nature that could damage you as well as enlighten you if you got too close. Everybody was fascinated by this process. The people who came back, the loyal following, was largely amateur, but the professionals cycled through quietly and listened and learned, and went away and thought about what she was doing. Even people who were on the other side of the paradigm dispute were interested in what she was doing and even hopeful that she would be successful, even though they wouldn't come out and say so because it would make difficulties for themselves politically in our field.

Q: You talked about Linda being a force of nature. Can you talk a little bit about that aspect of her, the way she just pushed through and got things out?

**David Friedel:** Linda took a lot of risks in her career in Maya epigraphy. She knew she was taking a lot of risks. Her own view on this fluctuated and varied with time. As a person who knew her intimately, and I did, I can say that Linda was actually very deeply wounded by accusations of having used people's work without attribution or hurt people that she loved dearly. This crushed Linda. It was an enormous burden to her. At the same time, it did not make her change her public style or her approach to risk-taking and scholarship. When I wrote with her our books, we decided from the outset to definitively footnote those books so that half the books are footnotes. They're very tiny script, but they are there. In those footnotes, Linda tried especially hard to give attribution to everybody about everything that was going into the work. Now, the fact is that people have accused her of quite consciously appropriating their material sometimes. I'm not in a position to judge that. They're the ones who have to make the case. I don't know, because I'm not an epigrapher. I do know that the epigraphic community has tried to become more careful in this regard over the years. Linda is by no means the only one who appropriated material from other people. It's not my place to speak to this matter directly, but I do know the facts, in certain cases, about how things really happened. So, while it's true that Linda hurt people's feelings sometimes, and was controversial even among her collaborators and colleagues sometimes, the fact is that the main thrust of both her intention and her scholarship was not to build on other people's unpublished work, but rather to promulgate the revolution of the epigraphic decipherment in ways that

would convince an increasingly wider circle of Maya scholars that this was the way to go. That was really the intention. It was never a selfish intention to aggrandize at the expense of others. She was deeply hurt by that accusation.

### **His overview of the emerging shape and significance of Maya history**

**Q:** In your own career, you've worked on anything from the beginning of Maya statehood to the height of superpowers to the termination rituals. From an archaeologist's point of view, can you give us an overview of your understanding of the formation of Maya statehood and political structure?

**David Friedel:** I think the Maya are one of the really important intellectual laboratories for the study of ancient civilization in the world. Because they were an historical society during their classical period, because they were still an historical society at the time the Spanish arose in the area, because we're learning so much about the pre-classic civilization....

**Q:** Can you give us a bird's eye view?

**David Friedel:** I'm at a stage in my own career where I can reflect upon a generation of work that I have myself undertaken, from the pre-classic to the post-classic and in the middle. I still believe that the Maya civilization is a remarkable laboratory for studying cultural evolution, social evolution, the great issues of civilization.

I'm interested in power. I'm interested in how it is wielded by people, how its consequences, both intended and unintended, unfold over generations. I think archaeology can address these matters in ways that no other discipline can. I look at cycles of Maya civilization now - the pre-classic cycle, which is coming into focus even better in modern research, the classic cycle, and the post-classic cycle.

The classic cycle is one I'm focusing on now. There were two episodes in Maya civilization that I've written about in a new book that's under consideration, that really constitute empire building, efforts by the Maya to unite around a single power. The importance of this is fundamental because the Maya, unlike the Chinese, the Sumerians, the Egyptians, never did break through to true empire that encompassed most of the civilization. It never happened, but there were efforts. We can historically document those efforts now, as well as archaeologically pursue them in the ground. Those are fundamental contributions to science, in my own view. I think that the Maya suffered a great division culturally between people who believed that they were the pure race, the people of the first generation of humanity, and the second view, more cosmopolitan, that

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embraced the view that all Mesoamericans went back to the creation time, and that there were many creations, not just one creation place, in the Maya world. My own hypothesis is then that the Maya had a running civil war from the pre-classic period to the collapse, in which there were people on the two sides, the “Maya First” side, in which they were the true people and the special ones, and the Cosmopolitan Maya, who believed that they were part of a larger world fundamentally, that the Gods had created all of them and not just the Maya first.

This kind of debate, of course, is fundamental in civilization, in the identity of people. It’s a kind of national identity versus a global identity, and it is unsurprising that it is the fundamental issue of our own time and our own civilization. I think it probably has played into the dynamics of civilization since human beings invented this phenomenon. My agenda in the last analysis is to write about the Maya in ways that reflect upon our present dilemma in the world. The circumstances are not exactly the same, but the themes that human beings are struggling with in civilization are enduring.

Q: Moving from the Maya society you were studying in Cerros to the appearance of Tikal and Calakmul, what happened there? What was the change? How did those places come about?

**David Friedel:** There are three great powers in Maya history in the early phase, and then a fourth one in the late phase. In the early phase, El Mirador is the great power. I believe that it was the capital of Kan, of the Snake Dynasty. The great powers in the classic period were Tikal and then Calakmul, both of whom attempted to establish empire and hegemony over the Maya world, I am convinced. The last great power was Chichen Itza, which was a successful empire for a brief period of time but revolutionary in its understanding of politics and religion. Those great powers, then, are the powers that mattered most in Maya civilization, in my own view.

In my research, I am studying the rise and fall of Tikal and the rise and fall of Calakmul through a vassal state, El Peru-Waka, which was first vassal to the Teotihuacanos and their Tikal allies, and then vassal to Calakmul when it was the seat of the Snake kings and queens. By studying this history from the vantage of a witness, a vassal, and trying to see how the geography of power was implemented by these would-be empires, it’s wonderful fun to watch it unfold – because it is really unfolding literally before my eyes as we make new discoveries in the field, both archaeological and epigraphic.

The upshot of it is, though, that neither Tikal nor Calakmul could hold the center, as Yeats would say. They cannot hold together the Maya world. The reasons that they can’t remain elusive, remain complex. Why is it that the Maya refused to be the Maya? Of course, the word “Maya” was never used by them. They were the people of Waka or the

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people of Uxmal, or the people of Kan. They were not the Maya. Their cultural identity even remains elusive, because it lacked a name. Nevertheless, they had such a cultural identity, and they could've built upon it to create an empire. They refused, in the last analysis, to allow that to happen. I believe, in the end, that had a major, major influence on the 9<sup>th</sup> century crisis that's called the collapse.

I don't know why they failed. I just know that they did, and I'm documenting how they did. There is a lesson to be learned from this, and that is that people in great positions of power can have the best intentions in the world, and yet their decisions can still cause catastrophe.

Q: Going back to the beginning of these superpowers, why was it these great states instead of smaller ones? Was it their geographic positioning? What did they do in terms of structural positioning that made them superpowers? Was it the same story for both, or a different story for Tikal and Calakmul?

**David Friedel:** Linda Schele and I, in *A Forest of Kings*, already outlined the great struggles of the classic period that are still being studied. I think we did so in many ways that are still enduring. One of the things we said was we believe that El Mirador had been a dominating state in the center of the Yucatán peninsula and that, when it fell, you had contenders for stewardship, states that arose that claimed the prestige and power of El Mirador's state but did not wield that power, really. The two great contenders, in my view, were Kan, the power of the Snake Dynasty, which now epigraphers would place in southern Quintana Roo, at a site called Dzibanche, and then later, in the early classic period, at the site of Calakmul. Certainly there, in the late classic.

The other great power was Tikal, Mutul in their own language. I think that Mutul was a revolutionary site in certain fundamental ways. They claimed to be a creation place, as powerful as the chief's throne place, as my colleague, Stanley Gunter, would put it. The great creation locus in the heart of the Mirador basin, at Nakbe and then Mirador. They claimed, "No, there are creation places elsewhere and we are one of them." Having made such a claim, they opened themselves to the prospect that Teotihuacán and other great cities outside the Maya world were also creation places, as they claimed to be. So they invited a cosmopolitan perspective that led to alliance with Teotihuacán in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, an alliance that would come to fruition in 378 A.D., in January of that year, with the conquest of Tikal by a group of foreigners and Maya intent upon putting back in power a family that united the blood of Teotihuacán and Tikal. This great new order, as Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube call it, really did prevail in the Maya world for more than a century, but the people who allied to that order did not ally to Tikal. They allied to Teotihuacán. They allied to the idea of a Mesoamerica. While they deferred to Tikal as the local representation of this alliance, they did not see it as an imperial court to which

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they must continually defer. There was always a tension there and, as a result, it remained for most intents an alliance and not an empire, despite Tikal's best efforts.

Now, with the new dates for the burning of downtown Teotihuacán, it's becoming increasingly likely that the fall of Teotihuacán's downtown in the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century precipitated the crisis that resulted in the conquest and defeat of Tikal by its adversaries, led by the kings of Kan, the Snake Kings, now positioned probably out of Calakmul. Their rise followed. Now, why didn't they succeed? In the last analysis, we had no conclusive answer to that question except to say they had one tremendous king, Yuknoom Ch'een the Great, who matched the power and glory of Siak Kak, the uniter of the early classic Teotihuacán/Tikal alliance.

Yuknoom Ch'een, the Shaker of Cities. What a man! I would've loved to have known him personally. We have only one portrait on a looted pot but his influence, his handprints, are everywhere in the Maya world in his lifetime. For more than 50 years he constructed an empire, and it almost held. His successor, Yitsak K'ak, Great Firepaw, could not hold it. He was captured and likely sacrificed by his enemy, the king of Tikal. With that, the Maya spiraled into an age in which no great power would ever prevail again. Many small empires were attempted, all of them basically disrupting a political economy of great delicacy and complexity in my view. An economy similar to highland Guatemala in the "1940s and '50s, a solar marketing system.

If you are not able, in my view, to move maize around the Maya world, if you are not able to cash your maize into imperishables and then cash it back into maize, you could not live in the lowlands. Because of the drought sensitivity of maize, the spottiness of the rainfall and other sources of water, the Maya lowlands was a civilization predicated upon a cooperation economically that was profoundly disrupted and finally defeated entirely in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Q: What happens in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries? What's the picture as we head into this collapse period?

**David Friedel:** In the late period, Stanley Guenter, remarkable epigrapher and ancient historian, has I think correctly identified the rise of a new upstart class of military and commercial leaders, people who did not claim to be descendants of the great dynasties and who no longer tried to insinuate themselves into it but were warlords, pure and simple. *Kalomte*, the title introduced in 378 A.D. by Siak K'ak, Fire Born, the great Teotihuacán general. These *Kalomtes*, like Papamalil [ph?] and others, rose in this period of time, and they fostered alliances with the old kings that survived, to their own advantage. Their towns would flourish while other people starved. Their towns would have trade while other people's trade was profoundly disrupted.

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It became a kind of anarchy that unfortunately is very common in civilization, when what really matters is military might and immediate economic power, and what no longer matters is etiquette or ideology or religion, or the niceties of civilization. Those fail, and the warlords take over. I think they precipitate a lot of destruction in a lot of towns by goading and leading local people who are profoundly dissatisfied in the failure of their royal courts. Those royal courts are often devastated, smashed and destroyed, monuments scattered over a wide area, palaces sacked and burnt by local people in combination with these manipulating outsiders who are trying to short-sightedly capitalize on periods of chaos. Of course, that fails also. In the last analysis, they go down with this system that they are manipulating so violently.

The king of Tikal captured and defeated the king of Calakmul, ruining chances for empire in the late classic Maya world. This event occurred in 695 A.D. and, while the king of Tikal never says he sacrificed the king of Calakmul and the king of Calakmul was recently discovered interred at Calakmul, I believe that the king of Tikal eviscerated the king of Calakmul and then gave him back to his people more or less intact. They wrapped him up like a fly inside of a spider's web, in bromeliad fiber that was soaked in resin, and then put him on a beautiful palanquin of painted wood and carried him home, where they buried him inside of his own capital, so the king of Tikal could raise a usurper over the dead body of his adversary. Now, I have reasons for thinking this. I gave this story to the woman who excavated Yitsak K'ak over nine months, a curator at the Louvre museum. She got a funny look on her face as I told her this story. She said, "You know, David, we found over the naked chest of Yitsak K'ak a very peculiar phenomenon, a layer of plaster that had been painted black." Now, I cannot say that the layer of plaster was laid over to heal this slice through the stomach of the king so that his guts would fall out and he would die slowly, but at least it's one possible explanation.

Q: What is your take on the role of writing among the ancient Maya and how writing survived after the Spanish came?

**David Friedel:** To understand the role of writing in pre-Colombian Maya civilization, you have to understand the role of speaking, of storytelling, because the Maya are enormously preoccupied with storytelling and even today tell extraordinary stories about their lives, going back to the beginning of creation of the world. There was always storytelling and writing, writing and storytelling. The amplification of storytelling in writing during the height of the classic civilization was a kind of echo that the great elite had, that would legitimate and justify their political policies of the time in the context of a history that they were collectively writing together. The wonderful thing about the decipherment is it demonstrates that, like the ancient Greeks, the Sumerians, the Egyptians, the Chinese, these people were historically conscious. When they wrote, they wrote with the audience in mind of all literate Maya people, not just their local people.

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As a result they write about each other, and they write about their world, in ways that are now becoming clearer.

This was an armature of power. Writing was an armature of power. When royal government failed at the end of the classic period, it failed in the context of the collapse of divine kingship and the writing system that fostered divine kingship. How did it do this? By writing the history of kings in the context of the beginning of the world, so that the stories took on enormous weight, because everybody would have to try to compensate the existence of these events in the whole world in the context of their particular kings. When the writing system failed, the writing became artifact again. It stopped having the same content of words that it had. People cherished them or restored them. They manipulated, they reset them. They broke them. They burned them. They were thinking about writing for a century after writing ceased. We archaeologists are now in a position to see this unfold, to see writing die in the Maya world. It is a remarkable thing. Speaking never died. Storytelling never died. Indeed, book writing didn't die either. They still write to the present day. Some of their scribes are still alive and well in Yucatán. But that said, writing as an armature of power died in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and it was never revived again as it had been. The Maya used writing in a very special way but they did something with it that all ancient civilizations who used writing did, namely they collectively wrote ancient history. That makes the civilization unique in the new world.

Q: I'd like to talk about the shift from epigraphers to what you refer to as ancient historians. We've reached a kind of maturity in the decipherment, where we have ancient historians and the epigraphy is taken for granted.

**David Friedel:** The epigraphers are now diversifying, as well as unifying. They're unified around the method that is so comprehensively powerful now that I can't keep up with the changing spelling of the names of kings because they're made obsolete so rapidly. That said, some are specialists in spelling. Some are specialists in grammar. Some are specialists in the stories being told on painted vases. Some are trying to discern whether the Maya had priesthoods in the classic period, or did they have some other kind of religious organization. Going into social organization is a fundamental place for epigraphers today.

The area I'm most excited about is ancient history. The people who are writing ancient history, who are epigraphers, are saying things about the Maya that will allow us to compare Maya civilization in new and revolutionary ways with the Sumerians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Chinese, the Romans. We are going to enter a period of comparative analysis of civilization that is simply unprecedented in the new world.

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he ancient historians of the new generation are writing these comparisons even as I speak. They're thinking about these comparisons even as I speak. On the one hand, they're writing ancient histories about the Maya one after the other, each one becoming almost obsolete as it comes off the presses. At the other hand, they're beginning to arrange themselves for these comprehensive comparisons that will allow a new world civilization to stand with the old world civilizations that routinely are used for these purposes of analyzing how social history really works in antiquity.

Q: Do you think that, because of their isolated conditions, the Maya have something unique, that they can tell us about the nature of what it is to be human?

**David Friedel:** The Maya are going to be the uniquely ancient historical society in the new world, in the pre-Colombian period. The Aztecs, the Incas, and other peoples of the contact period are wonderfully enlightening, but the Maya are a pre-Colombian ancient historical society. The significance of it is not so much that the Maya didn't do things like other people. In the details they didn't, but in the general trends they did. What's important is demonstrating unequivocally that this gift of civilization, this responsibility, this burden, is humanity's. It's not coming from one people, one part of the world. We are all inheriting the legacy of the Maya, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Romans, and other ancient societies that were civilized. The reason we inherit this as a burden as well as a gift is that the failures of all those societies are still our failures. We must find ways to overcome them. We must reinvent civilization, given the foreknowledge of the Maya and all the other ancient civilizations. We have no choice. We invent civilization again, or we will not survive.

Q: That is a great place to stop, but I do have one other thing to ask. I wanted to end the talk about Linda by asking what you feel her legacy was. What do you think her importance was in the whole field of Mesoamerica?

**David Friedel:** Paradigm revolutions require revolutionaries. They require people who have the courage of their convictions, who are willing to go boldly where no one has gone before, who are willing to stand the response, the reaction, the ridicule. Linda Schele was a great revolutionary in the Maya epigraphic revolution. Now, revolutionaries are not always the most substantial scholars or the most enduring in their contributions. The revolutionaries are people who make the revolution real. They make enough people believe that it can happen, that it should happen, that it will happen, that they will not be afraid. This I can say, I think, with certainty: A lot of people were in Linda Schele's bow wave when she was moving forward against the currents of intellectual history and Maya studies. A lot of people flourished because Linda Schele was in front. Now, in the last analysis, they're going to have to come to this realization on their own. I can't convince them of this, but I am older than them. I have seen it, and I have seen them since they

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were young. I know this story. Nobody can tell me a story I don't already know. Linda Schele was at the front.