

DAVID STUART

Interviewed April 12 and 13, 2005 at his home in Austin, Texas

David Stuart began deciphering Maya glyphs at the age of 10, under the tutelage of Mayanist Linda Schele. His theory of redundancy in the Maya script, formulated at the age of 18, was to open the floodgates of the Maya decipherment. In collaboration with Evon Vogt and



others he has also worked extensively on the relationships between Maya epigraphy and ethnography. As the Linda and David Schele Professor of Mesoamerican Art and Writing at the University of Texas, he continues to be a leader in the field of Maya studies. He is the author *The Inscriptions from Temple XIX at Palenque*, and co-author of *The Memory of Bones* and *The Decipherment of Ancient Maya Writing*.

In this interview he discusses:

- [Early efforts to document the Maya script by Armendariz and Waldeck](#)
- [Figures in decipherment history, including Thomas, Thompson, Bever and Berlin](#)
- [His own early involvement with Maya glyphs](#)
- [His relationship with Linda Schele](#)
- [His work on redundancy in the Maya script](#)
- [The decipherment of the Primary Standard Sequence on Maya vases](#)
- [His work at Copán, beginning in 1986](#)
- [Changing views in the late 1980s of Maya political and military history](#)
- [The decipherment of various specific glyphs that have provided a “window” into ancient Maya thought and belief](#)
- [The recent shift from paraphrase to precise translation of ancient Maya texts](#)
- [The importance of the Maya Corpus Project and Justin Kerr’s rollouts of Maya vases](#)
- [How recent discoveries at San Bartolo change our understanding of the origins of Maya writing](#)

Interview transcript

Early efforts to document the Maya script by Armendariz and Waldeck

Q: Let's talk about the early folks coming into Palenque and Copán and trying to make sense of these glyphs.

David Stuart: The first drawings of Maya glyphs were done in the late 18th century, with Armendariz at Palenque. Later on, in the early 19th century, we have at Copán, some early explorers who come in and describe, at least, this strange writing system.

It's really clear that they're looking at something that's totally alien to them, which it was. They're wrestling with this idea, whether it's picture writing or whether it's something more than that. That's a question that wasn't resolved until really the 1950s, 1960s, even later.

Q: Let's talk specifically about individuals. Armendariz, how does he manage this?

David Stuart: Armendariz, when he draws some of the tablets from Palenque or portions of the tablets, is clearly just trying to present a general flavor of what he's looking at. He's seen nothing like this before. No one really has. He's picking and choosing elements that are maybe a little bit familiar to him. He's not showing a scientifically accurate drawing. He's not even trying to do that. They're not the kind of drawings that any scientist, or any linguist or philologist can look at and try to work with. Clearly, he's just recording bits and pieces of what he sees, and he's really not understanding what it is.

Q: When you get to Waldeck, have things changed? What are Waldeck's difficulties with it?

David Stuart: Waldeck comes to Palenque in the early 19th century. I think he's a much better artist. In fact, he's really a draftsman. He's trained in this, and that comes through in many of his drawings. I think a lot of his drawings, in fact the original ones, not the later engravings from his drawings but the original drawings, are actually not that bad. He's got a lot of details. He's paying attention to the iconography. He's paying attention to certain signs. I think he's becoming more and more familiar with them because he spent a lot of time in Maya ruins over the years. I think he was becoming more and more accustomed to what he was looking at. Some of his drawings aren't bad. They were never published, though. The good ones were never published. It wasn't really until several decades later that really good drawings were made.

Q: Could you talk about the elephants and things in Waldeck's images? You also spoke about getting bogged down in the details of the system.

David Stuart: Even though Waldeck was a very good artist in a way, even though he was looking at Maya glyphs and trying to put them down fairly accurately on paper, anyone who draws Maya glyphs even today will see things that aren't necessarily there in real life. Waldeck, he's notorious because he adds some things that clearly didn't belong in a Maya inscription, such as the head of an elephant in one tablet from Palenque. This thing's down a wrong path, I think, in many respects, of course. We now know that they Maya weren't even writing anything that visually looked like an elephant. He was not understanding the forms of the signs. This is the theme that you see time and time again with artists trying to record Maya inscriptions up until the 20th century. It's just a basic unfamiliarity with what the signs are, or what they should look like.

Figures in decipherment history, including Thomas, Thompson, Beyer and Berlin

David Stuart: Well, Cyrus Thomas is an interesting character because in some ways he had an interesting outlook on Maya glyphs. It was not really like anyone else. None of his contemporaries really thought that Maya glyphs could have this phonetic component, at least on the level that Thomas was proposing. The problem he had, though, was a basic ignorance of what constituted a Maya sign, the basic element of the script. The ignorance of the writing system even at that point went down to what was a sign, what was an element. You couldn't necessarily separate the letters, the characters of the script. Imagine trying to read any kind of alphabetic writing system if you don't even know what a letter is, and where it begins and where it ends.

He was really vulnerable to a lot of attacks. Of course, Eduard Seler, who was the great Mesoamericanist of the day, who had this remarkable comparative perspective on all of Mesoamerican cultures and who published all the time, he really criticized Thomas in a devastating way. Seler was correct in a lot of his criticisms, there's no question about it, but it's not that Seler necessarily understood Maya writing, either.

Q: Let's move up to Eric Thompson, his impact and influence on the field as an epigrapher. We'd like to talk about some specific things in terms of what he did contribute, and then ways in which he held back the field.

David Stuart: Thompson dominated Maya glyph studies, of course, in the middle part of the 20th century. From the 1930s up until the 1960s, even early 1970s, he was *the*

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figure. His authoritative book on Maya glyphs, everyone read. It's still read by some people. It's still very useful in some respects. There are brilliant descriptions of the Maya calendar and the mechanisms of the calendar that really can't be beat even to this day.

Thompson, even beginning in the 1930s, his approach to Maya writing, we look back on it now as a little bit strange. No one else at that time had any idea what Maya writing really was. He knew that they used logograms. Thompson was prepared in a sense to see that it was a phonetic writing system, because he was assigning word values to signs. The word for year, and the word for stone, and different god names and that kind of thing. But it was that basic inability on his part to see that there was anything more in the phonetic character of the script that held things back.

Because of his position as the great western scholar on Maya writing, any counter-proposals were just met with immediate dismissal. In that sense, things were held back in Maya glyph studies in the '50s, '60s. Although it's hard to say really, I think, how much progress would've been made say even if Thompson had embraced the full phoneticism. A lot of scholars in those years, they didn't have the raw materials to work with. They didn't have all of these inscriptions to compare and cut up and put charts up on the wall. That came much later, even after Thompson died.

Q: Specifically, I'd like to talk about one paper of his, on counting, and his contributing to our understanding of it. Can you explain a little bit about what he made of it?

David Stuart: One of the readings that Thompson's really famous for, and was famous for even while he was alive, were the so-called "directional count glyphs". These were glyphs that he saw as kind of the plus and minus signs of Maya arithmetic. When the Maya were calculating time in their narrative texts, they would use one glyph to indicate that the time should be added in the narrative, and they'd use another glyph to indicate that it should be subtracted. Thompson sort of worked a lot of this out. He noticed that one of the consistent elements of these glyphs was a fish, a very ornate fish with a lot of fins on it and sharp teeth. He thought, "Well, that's a shark." It looks like a fantastic kind of shark.

Now, the word for shark in Yucatec Maya is "*xok*." In fact, our English word "shark" comes from Mayan. It's the same word. Here was this element, *xok*. What Thompson noticed and proposed, and I think got very excited about, was that the word "*xok*" also is a verb that means "to count." Thompson said, "Aha! Here we have a rebus sign. It's a picture of a shark indicating the word for 'to count.'" This was really, at the time, one of the great leaps forward in Maya writing, in the decipherment. They're using rebus, right? This was a decipherment that Thompson was very famous for. Up until the 1980s, and

even a little bit beyond that, people were hesitant to even think that Thompson could be wrong about that.

Q: Let's talk a bit about Beyer and the story of his cutting up the Chichen rubbing. That indicates the beginning of thinking in terms of structural analysis.

David Stuart: Mike tells the story. I don't know the details of that story so much, but I can try to tell it a little bit.

Q: Just the notion that, by laying things out and looking at them, you start to see these patterns.

David Stuart: Hermann Beyer is a really fascinating person in all of this work in the middle of the 20th century, 1930s, 1940s. He was working in conjunction with the Carnegie Institution of Washington. Sylvanus Morley was the great Mayanist who was overseeing operations with the Carnegie. Morley provided Beyer with a bunch of rubbings with inscriptions from Chichen Itza. Beyer really did the first systematic study of the inscriptions of a single Maya site, looking beyond just the dates, looking at the so-called non-calendrical glyphs. He really made some brilliant insights. He looked at these things really as structural patterns. He was looking at the rubbings and saying, "Okay, this glyph is the same as that glyph is the same as that glyph," without ever reading them. He just saw the patterns and the variant forms of certain elements. It's exactly what we do today when we tackle a Maya inscription, or a set of inscriptions.

The funny thing is when Morley provided Beyer with the rubbings of these texts, I think Beyer got so excited by the structures he was seeing that he cut up the rubbings into individual glyphs and was kind of putting them down on the floor or something and looking at them. When he was done with the rubbings, he sent them back to Morley just all cut up. Morley was furious!

The publication that Beyer did in the late 1930s, I remember reading it when I was kind of getting started in this stuff and getting really excited, because he was making these structural insights that not many people made later on in Maya glyph studies.

Q: When he was looking at these rubbings from Chichen Itza, he was seeing similar text?

David Stuart: Yes, he was seeing names--

Q: Can you talk a little bit about that? He was looking at something that had some of the advantages of a PSS, wasn't he?

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David Stuart: In a lot of ways, it was a good thing that Beyer was working with Chichen Itza inscriptions because they're very formulaic. They're pretty repetitive. A lot of them were carved and dedicated around the same time, in the same temples. They're mentioning the same people, we now know, and talking about the same sorts of things. Beyer couldn't read any of it except maybe the dates, but he saw these repeating sequences of signs, these things that we now know are, for example, names of individuals or names of gods. It was a very tight, controlled environment where you could make these structural comparisons, rather like what we did later on when we were looking at pottery texts, these dedication texts on pottery, highly repetitive. It's those repetitive texts that allow you to see how scribes will vary something.

It's essential in any kind of code breaking that you have sequences of signs or words that repeat from one place to another. Beyer, he really set the stage for a lot of the methodology in looking at Maya texts, and looking at these comparisons among different inscriptions, and looking at how the spelling of one name or one word might vary from text to text.

Q: Let's talk about the nature of working with similar texts and substitutions. What is a substitution? How does an epigrapher look for that kind of pattern, and what issues do you have with the substitutions?

David Stuart: One of the beautiful things about Maya writing is, of course, there's so much variation built into it. There are a lot of signs the scribe could draw upon, so when you're looking at inscriptions that may say the same thing, two or three examples of the same word, you're bound to come across some variations, signs that substitute for one another, that may look very different but are filling the same niche in the sequence.

Now, it's dangerous to assume that those are absolutely equivalent signs. A lot of times, they may not be. You can say "red jaguar." You can say "yellow jaguar." Red and yellow are two different words. They'd use two different signs; they're not equivalent. But in a lot of cases, the Maya used different signs that actually said the same thing. It took a long time to figure that out. When I was first getting started in this very early, Floyd Lounsbury said, "Don't assume that replacement of a sign means equivalence." Of course, he was absolutely right about that.

Well, what we learned as we kept going was that the Maya were actually able to repeat things all the time using different signs, that a lot of these equivalences were direct substitutions of signs with the same meanings, with the same sound values.

Q: How do you tell? How do you go about exhausting the possibilities to find out if they mean the same thing?

David Stuart: It's a subtle process of figuring out how to know whether a substitution is a change of meaning or whether it's a purely graphical change, and they're actually saying exactly the same thing using two equivalent signs. The way that I kind of went about this, at least early on, was to never assuming anything. But when you start seeing the same sets of signs replacing each other in different contexts, in different situations, you pretty quickly become aware that there is a finite group of elements that basically are just substituting for one another in the same places, that they're just the same thing. The scribes are picking and choosing the elements they want to use and they're all functionally the same.

Q: Okay. Let's talk about Berlin.

David Stuart: Heinrich Berlin is one of these fascinating people who kind of comes into Maya studies from the back door, from the side. You know, not trained as an archeologist; didn't get the big academic degree in anthropology, but rather he comes in and gets to know a lot of the great people in Maya studies. He was a close colleague to Eric Thompson; later on to Tanya Proskouriakoff, and he lived in Mexico. He lived in Mexico City, so he was a little bit away from the scene of the Carnegie Institution and the Peabody Museum, even though he knew a lot of these people and they were all fairly close colleagues.

Well, Berlin, early on in the 1940s, he's working in Palenque; he's helping out the archeologists there and he actually does some excavations, but he has this incredibly insightful mind, and he works very methodically, looking sort of at the inner structure of a lot of these inscriptions. He has the dates of course, of texts that a lot of people had already worked out. But he starts looking beyond the dates; he starts looking, and isolates this group of glyphs that he sees from site-to-site, that look very similar, except for one little element. It varies, you know; Palenque has its own variation and Tikal has its own and so forth. And so, he calls these 'Emblem glyphs'. Right? This is just a non-interpretative label for this category of glyphs that we now know work sort of like place names, at least in part. But, he didn't really go that far, I mean he didn't want to step over the boundary of being just very conservative and very precise. And so he just calls them 'Emblem glyphs' and that's one of the first indications we have that Maya inscriptions are talking about the real world, that they're talking maybe about places, about kingdoms.

And of course we know now that ‘Emblem glyphs’ were place names that turned into royal titles- the Holy Lord of Palenque; the Holy Lord of Tikal. You know Berlin did not know that, but he set the stage for all of that work, and for much of the work that Tanya Proskouriakoff did as well.

Q: Didn’t he start using these titles at Palenque – he began to figure out who some of these rulers were?

David Stuart: Yeah.

Q: He didn’t actually go so far as to call them rulers. He was conservative about that as well.

David Stuart: Right. Right.

Q: Let’s go to Palenque. Go ahead.

David Stuart: Well, Berlin’s special interest in Palenque, a site where he had spent a lot of time, that translated into his working on a lot of inscriptions from Palenque. And one of the really important papers that he published was on the sarcophagus of Pacal, which was found in the early 1950s. His friend and colleague, Alberto Ruz, of course excavated this incredible monument. And Berlin writes one of the first analyses of the symbolism and the figures on the sarcophagus, and he actually notices that there are glyphs by the portraits. And he carefully reasons and proposes, but maybe not in so many words, but you can always catch his drift when he’s saying this. He saying, well maybe these are actually personal names, you know?

And, you know, there’s no big crescendo to his argument or anything. He’s not being very forceful about it. It’s very kind of low key, but it was a direct influence on what Proskouriakoff was doing around exactly the same time with her study of the inscriptions of Piedras Negras and other sites, identifying personal names in the inscriptions – a monumental change in the way we look at Maya texts, but made by this very unassuming man, in a very unassuming way. Because he published his papers in fairly obscure places, you know, it was only the epigraphers who really read his material. They weren’t widely known beyond that small circle. And even then, it was still pretty obscure. So, looking back on it, we can sort of trace an evolution of these ideas, and see that Berlin really planted the seeds for a lot of this historical revolution in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Q: The sarcophagus dealt with the early dynasties, the first 200 years say of Palenque –

David Stuart: Yeah.

Q: The Tablet of the 96 Glyphs deals with the second 200 years, and so [Berlin's paper on that tablet] sort of laid the groundwork for what happened at the first Mesa Redonda.

David Stuart: Uh-huh.

Q: Let's talk about that.

David Stuart: One of the other great papers that Berlin wrote and published in 1968, I think he actually started writing it a bit earlier than that, though, was on the famous Tablet of the 96 Glyphs from Palenque. Whereas he had proposed that there were these personal labels on the sarcophagus lid and on the sarcophagus itself of Pacal, you know, he kind of took that idea a little bit further with the Tablet of the 96 Glyphs analysis, and he identified what turned out to be verbs: the "seating glyph", which we know means "acceding in office"; a king taking the throne.

What he did in that paper was really remarkable. And again, it was done in a very unassuming way; in a very kind of dry way, too. It's kind of hard to read some of Heinrich Berlin's papers, you know, they're not easily absorbed. You kind of have to plod along with them, but he points out personal names for kings. He doesn't call them that. But, he's laying the groundwork for the entire dynastic history of late classic Palenque, you know, between his analyses of the sarcophagus and then later on in the 96 glyphs, he's filling in these historical figures. Right? And so this is really what leads directly into the first Mesa Redonda at Palenque.

Q: Doesn't he sort of refer to them just as "Subject A"?

David Stuart: Yes, that's right.

Q: Can you talk about that? About his conservatism in that?

David Stuart: Well, Berlin was so careful and – I don't know what the word is, maybe he didn't want to cross that line. I don't know why, but he wouldn't even call them *people*. You know, it was a very impersonal look at this historical text. I can't remember exactly how he labels these kings. I mean one of them is like Subject A or Topic A, or something like that. And these, we now know, are the kings' names. So, he isolates that structure. I mean, he gives you the dates. There are the "seating glyphs" and then there are these "topics", quote/unquote, or whatever word he uses. These are the kings' names! And just a few years later, with the Mesa Redonda of Palenque, that becomes widely accepted.

His own early involvement with Maya glyphs

Q: Getting to your own history – let's begin with your first trip to Mesoamerica in 1968.

David Stuart: Okay. Yeah, my first trip to Mesoamerica was in 1968, when I was three years old – taken down to Mexico and Guatemala by my parents. And they were traveling throughout the entire region because they were writing a book on Mesoamerica for National Geographic. And so we spent a lot of months down there – extended trip. I remember Monte Alban – one of my first memories, in fact, was at Monte Alban; walking along the famous Danzante sculptures. I had a little toy truck, I remember, and I was kind of running it along the Danzantes. I actually remember doing that. There's a photograph published in a book, I think, of me, actually doing that very thing.

We went to Tikal. We went to Chichen Itza, and I remember both of those sites very, very well; riding in airplanes across the jungle, you know, looking down at the forest canopy. It was pretty exotic stuff. That, I think, really planted the seeds for a lot of interest in me. I mean, three years old, what can you do? You're just experiencing the world. And it was gonna' be another five years before I could get back to Mexico, when I'm eight years old. And I remember being very excited about the idea of going back to see, you know, Maya pyramids and that kind of thing.

Q: In 1973, the Primera Mesa Redonda happens, and you were too young to be there, but can you describe to me remembering your parents coming home from that?

David Stuart: Yeah, I do. I do.

Q: And how excited they were – can you talk about that? And then talk about with hindsight, what your impression is of what was different about that conference than what had gone before in Maya studies, and what it contributed.

David Stuart: Right. Well, in 1973, I guess I was, you know, seven years old or something like that, and I remember that my mom and dad went to Mexico. They went to Palenque for the meeting – for the Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque. Now, I didn't remember any of the reasons why they went to Mexico. I remember we had to stay home. The kids stayed home in North Carolina while they went away. But what I do remember is my dad when he came back. I remember him sounding very excited about a lot of new ideas about the ancient Maya and that's about all that I registered at the time. So, obviously there was all this synergy, you know, coming out of that conference that I really, even at that time, as a seven year old, not necessarily even interested in

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archeology, I remember that. I remember seeing that on his face and hearing him talk about it.

So, looking back at the first Mesa Redonda, even though I was not there, you know, I sensed some of that excitement firsthand, in a way, in an indirect way. And I think the importance of that meeting was really the synergy that it gave to the field. You know, new ideas, with those new people. Maybe taking some ideas that had been around a long time and putting them together in new ways, or presenting them to a new audience. It was really phenomenal. I mean there had been no meeting like that, where, you know, people would concentrate on one site and be brought in from all different kinds of backgrounds. But it was that energy that Mike Coe and Merle and Linda, Floyd Lounsbury, Peter Matthews – there's a core group there that really kind of would define Maya archeology and Maya glyph studies for the next, you know, 20 years or so.

Q: Great. That core group you're talking about, they went on from Palenque to apply some of that same spirit of working in depth on a single site and applying the energy of a group of people to a single site, and also their look at parentage statements for example, the famous unpublished paper on parentage statements. Can you talk about that group and what they accomplished over the next five or ten years of concentrated work on that topic?

David Stuart: Coming out of the first Mesa Redonda meeting was, you know, this core group of scholars – some established anthropologists like Floyd Lounsbury, Mike Coe and his students; Peter Matthews, who was very young at the time; of course, Linda Schele, who was brand new to Maya studies. You know, such a varied background of people, but they became all very close and collaborated on a lot of different things, focusing on Palenque. Palenque was really still the place where so many of the analyses of the structure of Maya inscriptions – it was really Palenque where that was being done, still. Kind of carrying on the work of Berlin and other people who had focused on that site. So, I know Floyd Lounsbury, just always had Palenque in his mind. He was always thinking about the analyses of the details of the Palenque inscriptions, and he was a great influence on Linda Schele and Peter Matthews.

One of the great papers that they did together, the three of them, was the identification of what they called Parentage statements. That is, Maya texts were often talking about king so-and-so being the child of this royal lady and the child of this previous king. So it was really a nice way to start to develop genealogy, you know, not just taking the names and dates of a history and a dynasty, but making family connections between them. And that was really the first time that people could do that. And that was one of the typical outgrowths of that kind of collaboration. Linda brought an incredible visual sense and

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visual memory. I think Peter also was a remarkable draftsman – is a draftsman, and very analytical in the way he approaches glyphs. Floyd Lounsbury, of course being this Emeritus professor from Yale, his knowledge of linguistics and of kinship terminologies – that’s what he was famous for, even at that time, was looking at Cherokee kinship systems and so forth, Iroquoian languages. He brings that experience and detail analysis to Maya glyph studies. It had not really existed before. And it was all of these different elements that kind of got blended together there at Palenque, and created this remarkable 10 years of work, say, even beyond that.

Q: Great. Could you talk a little bit about what came out of that group – something that you referred to as the workshop approach? What was the workshop approach?

David Stuart: Yeah.

Q: Let’s just talk about that – I think structural analysis and paraphrase were very much – they got a lot of mileage out of getting out of looking at things as narratives for the first time – looking for the stories, even if some of the details were missing.

David Stuart: Right. That early work out of the Mesa Redonda with Floyd and Linda and Peter was, I think what can be called this workshop approach. And I think the roots of that are in these mini-conferences that the three of them had. And I participated in a couple of the later ones. You know, beginning in the mid-70s, on through the late 70s, early 80s, where they would get together themselves in Washington, D.C. or up in Boston, and look at inscriptions in a way that really hadn’t been done before. Looking at them as stories, you know, looking at them for structural patterns and cutting and pasting these sequences of glyphs, kind of like the way Herman Bayer was doing before, but looking at them more with a sensibility of language; looking at them in terms of historical names. Now that the content had been coming out, you could start to piece together, you know, verb... name... the calendrics had all been worked out. So it was this inner structure that they were focusing on, and this collaborative approach really set the stage for widening this participation in Maya studies.

The workshop approach found its ultimate expression in the Texas Meetings, starting in the late 70s, when Linda presented a lot of these results to a wide audience. And then they themselves would get together and do these larger structural analyses. And that was sort of the time I got into it, because I was one of the people who came to the first Texas meeting and was seated at a table with other people and, you know, cutting up glyphs and putting them together. Okay. Here’s a verb and here’s a name – why are they repeating over here? It was that approach that sort of grew out of that collaboration, and just blossomed into this kind of community of scholars and interested people.

Q: What was the atmosphere at the Texas meetings? Can you describe a little bit more of what they felt like?

David Stuart: The atmosphere at those early Texas meetings was incredible. I think I came out for the first one and I was 12, 13 years old. I remember flying for the first time, by myself on an airplane, from North Carolina to Austin. And Linda, you know, she and I had been close friends and she had been tutoring me for several years, up to that point. But, just the excitement in the air – people came from a long way away to hear Linda present these extended offerings on what the Palenque texts had to say. You know, it was the first time that scholars outside this core group of glyph people, you know, it was the first time that they could hear what had happened, really. And so I remember being there; sitting in the audience hearing Linda go through the Tablet of the Cross. And a lot of it was paraphrasing; I mean, that was something that Linda really liked to do – even though a glyph couldn't be read in all of its detail, the way maybe we can do it now, she was happy to kind of give it a little bit of a reading. Just, okay, this is a glyph that we know probably means battle or warfare, or, you know, a glyph that means accession to power. No one at the time could necessarily read it, but we knew more or less what it had to say. And so that's the way Maya inscriptions first opened up; was the realization that wow! They really are talking about this sort of thing. It wasn't necessarily that we could read them the way an ancient Maya could read them, in a phonetic way, but we could reconstruct the skeleton history of Palenque and lots of different sites.

Q: Great. Let's talk about 1974 when you went with your family to Cobá.

David Stuart: Well, yeah, in 1974, the Stuart family packed up in a Chevy Suburban in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and headed off towards Mexico. I remember we were on the road for about 10 days. My dad was helping to run a project down at the ruins of Cobá, this vast Maya ruin in what was then a pretty isolated area of the Maya lowlands. This was before Cancun was built; really the road there along the coast near Tulum was a dirt road. It took us a long time to get into Cobá, and we were driving through the jungle, through high forest.

I had not been to Mexico since I was three years old. I didn't know what to expect and I didn't remember – I mean, what are we getting into here? I mean, here we are moving into this little Maya village – a beautiful place. It was around these gorgeous lakes, big pyramids covered by forest. But, I distinctly remember for the first two or three weeks, just hating it. It was hot; there were a lot of bugs; we were all kind of crammed into this Maya hut, not quite knowing what we were doing.

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But after about three weeks, I had this transformation, and I just loved it. And that was the summer of 1974. We were there for five months that year, while my dad was out mapping the site. And I remember being really sad when we left Cobá that summer.

Q: Wasn't there a stela or some carving with dates on it that was discovered?

David Stuart: Yeah. I remember that summer. It was kind of hard to find a way to occupy myself. I mean, part of the reason I didn't like Cobá, maybe, for the first few weeks was that I was, you know, not very comfortable. I was also pretty bored, but I found myself looking at the ruins, and kind of wandering around. I mean, there were huge buildings in our backyard with steps, you know – buildings that never had been mapped or looked at by an archeologist. It was just kind of an incredible place to wander around as an eight-year-, nine-year-old kid.

And so I started to draw things. I was pretty good at drawing and liked to draw. And there I was, you know, I found myself looking at Maya stelae at Cobá – not very pretty sculptures, I have to say. Cobá has pretty eroded monuments, but they were kind of intriguing to me. And I remember looking at the glyphs and being interested in them.

What really got me though, was while we were at Cobá, there were a couple of monuments that were actually discovered, and I remember my dad being very excited. We would kind of hop in the car and drive down to where some workmen had uncovered, you know, the top of a stela with, you know, a long inscription on it. And my dad would drop everything and work on drawing the monument. He was having more fun doing that than he was mapping, I think, out in the woods. And I would just sort of look over his shoulder while he was doing that and thought, gee, this is pretty amazing. I mean, here's this thing coming out of the ground! He's drawing it, and the dates were there – the bar and dot numbers.

I was kind of learning about this sort of thing. I started reading the few books my dad had there in the field. He brought along, you know, Thompson. He brought along a couple of other books that had drawings of Maya glyphs in them. So, I was reading what I could and of course I couldn't understand 80 percent of what was there in these books, but I remember copying drawings that were in Thompson's books. It was really a fun way to pass the time in Cobá, was to kind of play like that.

And so we continued along like that and, you know, by the time we got back to the States, I was so – I don't know – my inner soul had been so affected by that experience that I just wanted to keep going back. And by the time we went back the next summer for the second part of that project, boy, I was so ready. And I just remember, you know,

we got into Cobá and the door of the car opened and I just ran out to our house. And, you know, saw everything as it was. And that year was great, too, because more stuff was discovered. And I had been bitten by the ‘Maya glyph bug’ and would never go back.

Q: Great. Thank you. <Question off mike>

His relationship with Linda Schele

A: I first met Linda Schele in, I think it was, 1976. It was after I had been to Cobá and when I was beginning my kind of obsession with Maya glyphs, and drawing them, and reading what I could about what had been written about them. And I remember my dad being kind of excited because Linda was coming to Washington to the National Geographic Society offices to be consulted on the book – the next book that my mom and dad were working on called *The Mysterious Maya*.

So, I met Linda in the offices of National Geographic. It was one afternoon, and I remember kind of sitting quietly in the office while she was talking to several people who were kind of gathered around her. And she was drawing glyphs and I was going, wow, you know, this is the real thing! And she was describing something about Palenque, I think it was. She was drawing a glyph and – I don’t know why I blurted this out, because, you know, I wasn’t a very outgoing kid, I think. But I said, “Oh, that’s a fire glyph.” And so Linda kind of paused and I remember she sort of looked behind her shoulder and over at me and said, “Yeah. You’re right, kid. That’s a fire glyph.”

And over the next couple of days, I remember my dad really hit it off with Linda and my mom hit it off with Linda. And for some remarkable reason, and maybe I’ll never understand why, Linda kind of decided to take me on as a pupil, in a way, to look at Maya glyphs at Palenque. She invited me down, along with my mom, the next summer to Palenque, where she was going to be working on her drawings of the tablets and making corrections to her drawings. And she saw that I was doing some drawings of Maya glyphs, and I guess she liked them a lot.

So, she allowed me to help her check her drawings. You see, we were in the temples, you know, with flashlights, with her drawings on clipboards, making corrections, just she and I together in this – and the next summer was one of the most amazing times of my life. A very intensive experience, you know, being at the site; living in Palenque, with Linda Schele and Merle. Merle was there; we lived in their house. That energy of the Mesas Redondas were still – I mean, still palpable in that house. And there I was! I spent a good two months there. And, you know, we went through those tablets, and I got

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to know them better than anything else, because I was correcting Linda's drawings – like correcting, sure. How could I correct Linda's drawings, in a way? But I was getting to know every line of those tablets. And if I hadn't done that, I don't really know if I would've been able to approach Maya glyphs the way that I later was able to. You know, looking at the level of detail that it really required. And so it was that summer that really made it possible for me to study Maya glyphs, and to keep going at it in subsequent years – and to give me the confidence to do it as a 12 year old kid.

Every day Linda and I would go out to the temples and work on the drawings and so forth and, while we weren't at the site, I was often in the library. Merle had this incredible library down in Palenque, you know, all the books you could ever want to study the ancient Maya and so Linda, I remember. was saying, "Okay kid, if you want to learn Maya glyphs, you've got to do it on your own. I'll help you." But she wasn't just showing me what things were, I mean, I had to go in and kind of work it out myself and come back and ask her questions, and so she said, "Okay. Take this drawing, take these glyphs" – they were tablets we were working on, and she said, "Okay. Read this. Go take it in the library, find out what you can and come back to me."

And so I was feeling all this pressure, but it was also so much fun. I mean, I was having a blast. I remember I had a big legal pad, and every line would correspond to a glyph. And so I'd write down what I thought each glyph was, and come out and show Linda and I think Linda was kind of bowled over because I had something to say about every glyph. Maybe it wasn't right, but at least I had something to say about it. And there was one glyph in particular that I thought, well, this looks like it's some sort of word or designation for these Palenque gods, you know, the Palenque triad. I wasn't sure what it was, but I showed Linda what I thought it was doing and she said, "Kid, you can come down at the next Mesa Redonda and give a paper on these glyphs."

And that was the next incredible thing that happened, and that was the third Mesa Redonda of Palenque, and I gave that paper, and was terrified in front of this audience of people. By then the Mesas Redondas were these big deals. They were these incredible meetings, everyone wanted to come down. I don't know how many people were there, but I was terrified, you know, reading this paper for about ten minutes or whatever it was, and it was great. I mean, it was really a remarkable thing, and I wrote the paper and it was published within a couple of years. But that was the first paper I ever gave and, you know, Linda, just – her encouragement was – I mean, anyone else would've said, "Oh, that's kind of interesting, kid." And then would've ignored me and gone on to do more important things. But for some reason Linda just gave me that encouragement that was what put me where I am.

Q: Another thing that happened at that 1978 Mesa Redonda, you met Peter and Floyd and I think Nick and Kathryn, this unique group. Can you talk a little bit about that? I think Peter had a particular influence on you for a while. Go ahead, talk about your impressions of some of these people you got to know over the next few years.

David Stuart: Well, that conference I went to in, I guess it was the summer of '78, the third Mesa Redonda, I got to meet all these people who I had heard about for a long time and had never met, Floyd Lounsbury, Peter Matthews, just a lot of people. Archaeologists who didn't even necessarily have a whole lot to do with Maya glyphs, a lot of people came to the Mesa Redonda. Barbara MacLeod I met there, Dennis Puleston, all sorts of folks and it was amazing.

I got to know the different personalities and I remember Peter especially, I loved reading the stuff that Peter was producing, often in collaboration with Linda, but often on his own. You know, he was so meticulous and his drawings were beautiful and I remember feeling like I want to do this, in such a careful and scholarly fashion. You know, he laid things out beautifully and presented arguments beautifully and I thought well gosh, that's the kind of Mayanist who I want to be, and so I really thought between the two of them, Linda and Peter were these incredible role models to have and even though I worked a lot more closely with Linda, Peter was a huge influence on me.

Q: Good. One other question, we've got a couple of minutes. I think it was not that Mesa Redonda, but maybe 1980, you went to a Mesa Redonda and then afterwards you and Linda went to Mexico City and worked with Nick and Kathryn and I think Linda, at that point, had realized for the first time that linguistics and linguistic analysis were important to what she was doing and – I think somebody described how Linda would realize that she needed a topic and sort of gobbled it whole.

David Stuart: Yeah, exactly.

Q: Can you talk about how that happened with linguistics in the summer of 1980?

David Stuart: Yeah, I think it was the summer of 1980 and Linda and I were traveling together in Mexico, as we often did in those years. I mean, she would bring me along to Mexico City, for example. We spent a couple weeks with Nick Hopkins and Kathryn Josserand. Linda really wanted to learn as much as she could about Mayan verbs, because she was actually doing her thesis on linguistics, on Mayan verbs. Linda wrote a very famous book called *Maya Glyphs: The Verbs*, that came out of her dissertation and I think she saw it as sort of a weakness in her own background. She didn't know a whole lot about linguistics in Mayan languages, but from working with Floyd and seeing what

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was being done with Mayan language, she really wanted to absorb as much as she could and so, you know, I was there and we were both poring over Chol Maya texts that Nick and Kathryn had compiled, and we were working there together, parsing all the texts and figuring out what the verbs were and all of the tense forms and really the nitty gritty analysis of Mayan languages. And so that was one of my first exposures to it at that level, along with Linda. So we learned a whole lot that summer, and I appreciated a whole lot about the inner workings of Mayan languages. and that turned out be really important.

Q: We're picking up on the 13th in the morning with David. Let's talk about 1980 and other events in 1980, the expedition to Naj Tunich, and how that came about and your experience there.

David Stuart: The trip to Naj Tunich Cave was on New Year's Eve 1980, and the background of that is that there was news from Guatemala, a phone call to National Geographic, that this cave had been discovered with Maya glyphs in it. So my father decided to go down and check it out along with Bill Garrett, who is the editor of the magazine, and I was lucky enough to be invited along too.

I was about 14 years old when we went down to Naj Tunich, and it was one of my first times really in a exotic kind of jungle environment. In Cobá there were people living in the village there, at the site, and here we are in the middle of the rain forest in a really remote part of Guatemala. It was hard going for me, I remember, and going into a cave that was immense – I had never been to a cave before, and this is one of the largest ones in Guatemala, but the paintings were incredible. We went inside and we saw the charcoal glyphs, this beautiful calligraphy, and drawings of figures and people playing the ball game and it was just – you'd turn a corner in the cave and you'd see another painting. There's no other place like this in all of the Maya world, and one of the things that was most exciting about that visit was, in all my exhaustion and sweating in the cave and looking at these amazing texts, one thing really stood out to me when I began reading this one inscription, or reading it to the best I could, which was that they spelled a word phonetically that I had never seen spelled that way before. This was the name for one of the months of the Maya calendar called *Pax*. I was looking at this inscription and looking at the dates and I thought well, that's kind of a strange month glyph. I knew it had to be a month glyph from where it was, and it was *Pa* and this unknown sign and I thought well, gee whiz, that may be the syllabic spelling of the word *Pax*, which we had never had before. So I thought well, maybe that's the syllable *xa* that goes with *Pax*, *Pa xa*. It seemed like a really good idea, and there was no way I could test a theory there in

the cave. So I had to wait until I got back to the States a few days later, and sure enough I found the evidence that really convinced me that *xa* was the right reading. So that was the first syllable that I guess I felt like I deciphered, and it was a wonderful feeling.

Q: How did you confirm it? Give me an example of how you confirm a reading, and how did you then determine that *xa* was the right reading.

David Stuart: When I got back to the States, what really convinced me that '*xa*' was the right reading – Well, first of all, I found some examples where the regular way you spell Pax with this word sign, sometimes in Dresden Codex had the same *xa* syllable underneath it. So there it was simply working as what we call a phonetic complement onto the logogram for Pax. So that's a really good setting for it. That really confirms at least that that month glyph at Naj Tunich is *Pax*.

And then you start looking around, and one of the places *xa* is pretty common, or at least the sign I thought might be *xa*, is in the glyph for north, and I thought well, this is kind of interesting because it's the first sign in that glyph. No one had been able to read it except to know that it had to be a glyph that meant 'north.' Well, it turns out that the word for 'north' in Yucatec Maya is *xaman* and so that again was just a perfect explanation for the pattern you were seeing in the glyphs. It's not a very common sign, so it's not like I could go around and confirm it through lots of different examples, but there was enough there I think to really nail it down.

Q: In 1982, I think Gillett invited you to come and do a paper at the Princeton conference which ended up being on blood. Talk about a little bit of the background of that, and this theme of blood in the Maya stuff.

David Stuart: Well, one of the things that happened to me fairly early on – and I think anyone who studies glyphs, beginning really at any point in life, you inevitably start getting into rather deep interpretations of Maya art, because if you're reading the glyphs they tell you much about what's happening in accompanying scenes and in the iconography. So it's the flip side of epigraphy. You have to look at the art and the symbolism to help you understand the glyphs and vice versa.

So I found myself in the early '80s becoming really interested in the iconography of ancestors and of blood and bloodletting. There had been a really influential paper back in the '70s by David Joralemon on bloodletting in Maya art, and representations of this ritual self-sacrifice that kings and other people did. It's a theme that even Eric Thompson wrote about quite a bit. So it's something that people had known about, and I had tried to tie together a lot of strands of the visual records and the visual presentation of

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bloodletting in Maya art. So in 1982, I was invited to give a paper. This was I think about the second or third paper I had ever given to anybody. This was several years after that Mesa Redonda I went to and this was a conference at Princeton University of all places, the Ivy League, and Gillett Griffin, who had been at the Mesa Redondas since the very beginning, he invited me to come talk to the crowd there at Princeton and there were some luminaries there who I had never met before. I remember Mike Coe was in the audience and I distinctly remember being up on stage, talking about Maya iconography with Mike Coe down in the front row looking up at me and how terrifying could that be? And I also met Steve Houston at that conference. That was the first place that we had met, because he was one of Mike's grad students.

So I presented this paper and it wasn't so much on reading glyphs. It was about okay, this is how blood is represented in Maya art and here it's tied into ancestry and cosmology. It started to get into pretty heavy ideas about Maya religion, and it's not something that I was necessarily an expert about, but I was just making these visual connections and that's really what I was presenting.

Q: Wasn't it in that paper that you presented the notion that the things that they were scattering with their hands were blood drops? I think that sort of starts there and sort of builds to a point where by *The Blood of Kings* [exhibition in 1986] everything is perceived as blood, and then more recently that's kind of been modified a little bit.

David Stuart: One of the important parts of the paper I gave at Princeton when I was seventeen was trying to explain the so-called scattering ritual, which is a really common representation on Maya stelae where you often see a king who has his hand outstretched, and there's either a stream flowing out of his hand or droplets flowing out. And what I was arguing was that many of these representations, if not all of them, were actually of human blood, of droplets of blood, sort of being cast into braziers or as offerings.

It was pretty straightforward and, like a lot of arguments in Maya iconography, it was probably over-argued. I probably went a little overboard with this in retrospect but I think a lot of the structures that I was talking about have pretty much held up, I think, over the years, and in a way I think it influenced some of the thinking in the '80s. I know that Linda was very excited by a lot of the stuff I was doing then in the early '80s. And some of that fed into her conceptualizations of Maya ritual, and her own work in looking at bloodletting and its importance.

In 1986, one of the big events in Maya studies in the later part of the 20th century was this fantastic exhibit that Linda and Mary Miller organized called *The Blood of Kings*, and that title I think came right out of that real interest in bloodletting throughout the 1980s.

Q: Are all of these seen as blood or do you think there's some detection maybe there of other things now?

David Stuart: Nowadays I don't think I would say that everything is bloodletting, everything that I used to call bloodletting. A lot of it is certainly thematically concerned with the shedding of ritual blood and its offering. But the thing is, the Maya also conceived of blood as one of many different sacred substances, and so the scattering ritual could also include incense, copal incense for example. That is also I think a very important component in a lot of these offering scenes that you see. So some of them are blood and some of them aren't blood. Conceptually, they're connected, though.

Q: In 1983, you did the *u bac* reading from the bones, and this was preceded by Peter's *u tup* reading back in 1979, which we've got Peter and Mike talking about. Talk about how his reading led in to yours. I don't know if you want to get too much into the "captives" part of that because it's a little confusing.

David Stuart: Well, in the early '80s, the phonetic readings of glyphs were progressing steadily along and in 1979, leading up to that, Peter Mathews had proposed the first name-tag identification on a Maya object. It was an ear spool that had the glyph for 'her ear spool' written on it, a pretty straightforward way of labeling an object, and that really started to open the door. In fact, it was sort of the initial cracking open of a door that turned out to sort of be floodgates because we found so many of these name tags in Maya writing.

And in 1983, I sort of threw in my 10 cents' worth by suggesting that some of the glyphs on these carved bones that were found at Tikal worked in exactly the same way, that they read *u bak*, which means 'the bone of,' and this was based on the syllabic combination *ba ki*, right, spelling the word *bak* for bone. And those were syllables that had been known. The *ki* sign was a fairly new reading that John Justeson and James Fox had proposed and so I thought well, this looks like a really productive thing. So how more straightforward could you get? It's his bone, it's her bone. These are ritual bone implements, not bones of one's body but things that were deposited in tombs as ritual implements like bloodletters and so forth. So it seemed to really pan out, and there have been several examples of these things found.

Q: Also in 1983, you were at Dumbarton Oaks. You got a fellowship. Was that when your parents sort of forgot to sign you up for college and you ended up at Dumbarton Oaks instead? You were there, and I think Linda was there at the same time.

David Stuart: No, no. Linda wasn't there.

Q: I thought she was at Dumbarton Oaks when—

David Stuart: No. She was with us in Washington at our house a little later on. In 1983, right when I graduated high school, I decided not to go directly to college because I felt like I had a lot of stuff to do with Maya research and Linda and I were starting to collaborate on some things and in fact we were talking about doing a book together. I was accepted at Dumbarton Oaks as a fellow that year, so I did that for my first year after high school, working with all of these graduate students and other scholars who were at Dumbarton Oaks, and it was wonderful.

The library was there and I felt like I was really kind of part of all of the research going on, and it was a time where I got some writing done and it was really focused for me, looking at a lot of pottery texts also. One of the really key parts of that year at Dumbarton Oaks for me was looking at their catalog of photographs of Maya pottery. A lot of stuff was unpublished at that point and so I was going through these slides, looking at these fabulous texts, and that really set the stage for my own understanding of what Mike Coe had called the Primary Standard Sequence, this repeating formula on a lot of Maya pots. So it was really exciting at that point. That one year at Dumbarton Oaks was just a concentrated time for me where I did nothing else except really looking at Maya glyphs and working out some of these patterns.

Q: You mentioned before that a lot happened that year. Wasn't it fairly early in that year when you got the MacArthur grant?

David Stuart: Yeah. That was while I was at Dumbarton Oaks. It was the '83, '84 academic year. Yeah.

Q: Didn't you get a call at home- --

David Stuart: Well, it was at D.O. actually. It was the spring of '84, towards the end of my fellowship there, I remember I got a phone message. I was away at lunch and we always ate together at Dumbarton Oaks, all of the fellows. So I got back and there was a phone message – a phone call from Chicago. I didn't know anyone in Chicago, so I thought it was a little strange. Here I was, 18 years old and a phone call from Chicago. I wasn't sure who this could be so I called the guy back, and it was a fellow from the MacArthur Foundation telling me that I had gotten a MacArthur prize fellowship, this 5-year amazing award, and that was sort of the beginning of a lot of stuff for me. That was really an amazing time, and also kind of a hard time for me too. At that age I think having to deal with a lot of that attention was – it was starting to be felt. I was dealing with some big issues there, I think and I don't know if I was quite ready at that point.

Q: Your parents weren't even in town. You got calls from the press and all this kind of stuff.

David Stuart: Yeah. I remember in the wake of that when it was finally announced, because I was the youngest person ever to get a MacArthur award, there were phone calls from the newspapers, TV crews at my office door, they were wanting me to be on national TV on the morning shows and that kind of thing, and I declined a lot of that because I just didn't want to deal with it. But yeah, it was in the newspapers, the Washington Post and everything, and that was pretty crazy. It was a pretty crazy time.

His work on redundancy in the Maya script

Q: Somewhere around '84, there are several things I want to talk about in that area of time. One very important one was that you took a new look at Thompson's symbol for counting. Talk about what you came up with.

David Stuart: Well, in 1984, one of the things that I remember working on is - - I was kind of working generally on this idea of structural comparisons and seeing how scribes varied things. I was revisiting Thompson's old idea about the *xoc* glyph, the "count glyph" in these distance number adding and subtracting calculations. Thompson had recognized that this was maybe a rebus sign, *xoc* meaning shark, and you had this fish glyph, but *xoc* also meaning "to count", right, and everyone had accepted that, and I had accepted that, and I think it was a given. Any student of Maya glyphs thought that that was the quintessential example of rebus writing in Maya glyphs.

Well, I noticed an interesting pattern, which was that there was a lot more going on with these glyphs than just this shark glyph, that there were five or six different forms they could substitute in for that shark while everything else around it kind of looked the same. So I was trying to figure out, why are these all filling this role? They can't all mean to count - or maybe they do. So I was trying to investigate why they might be equivalent.

Well, I started noticing that in other places the same set of signs could replace each other, and one of the variants that kept showing up was the sign that Landa had identified as *u*, that is the glyph that means his or hers or its, a very common sign in Maya writing. So it seemed like *u* could replace the shark, and it could replace all these other things. The more I looked at it the more it became clear to me that Thompson had been wrong, that all of these signs actually were variants of the pronoun *u*, his, hers or its, and I just compiled example after example after example of these elements filling that role.

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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And so in 1984, I was basically ready to throw Thompson's reading out and say okay, these are all just *u* signs, and that it's probably spelling a very different word because underneath every one of these shark glyphs and all of these variable elements is the sign that you pronounce as '*ti*,' right. So you put *u*, *ti* together and that spells the word *ut* which, if you look it up in the dictionaries in the right languages means "to happen", "to come to pass", and the more I thought about it the more that made such good sense in that setting, that a date *happens*, right? You calculate time, and then *happens* this day and then something, some historical event, will ensue. So that was my proposal, that Thompson had been wrong and that this was an example of Maya scribes just kind of going nuts with substituting elements that turned out to be the same, *u* signs. Now we know there are seven or eight, nine, different variants of *u* that look very different, but functionally they're the same.

Q: Thompson had had found a count forward and a count backward, what he thought. What did those turn out to be? Explain how Thompson characterized them. They actually work the way he thought, but they had a verbal meaning. It wasn't simply a conceptual flag.

David Stuart: Yeah. Thompson had noticed and noticed correctly that there were two forms here of these directional glyphs. One was sort of "count forward" and one was "count backwards". They were sort of the plus and minus signs of Maya arithmetic, in a way, and the "count" reading that he proposed for the shark, the *xok* glyph, seemed to make perfect sense there. Well, we now know that the Maya were actually writing a very different verb read *u ti* phonetically which is *ut*, to happen, to come to pass, and it turns out that the "count forward", quote unquote, and the "count backward", quote, unquote – the difference between those glyphs is simply one of marking tense, verb tense. If you're calculating back in to time, you will mark a verb as being in the past tense. If you're marking going forward in time, you're marking the verb differently as taking place in the present tense or maybe even in the future tense. So that's the real distinction behind these glyphs.

Q: Sort of a major change happened as a result of that decipherment. I think you described it once as sort of collapsing the complexity, or greatly simplifying the script, because nobody recognized that there was this much repetition before. Talk about that, how that began, a few things that helped open the floodgates.

David Stuart: Well, one of the things that really came to my mind working with these directional glyphs and working with the pottery dedication text is that underlying Maya writing is actually a pretty simple structure, despite all of the visual complexity of it.

Scribes were using all of these variant signs, but they were always saying and writing the same thing over and over again.

So it became very clear to me around 1983, 1984, that the real task of code breaking was basically working out the visual forms of the signs, working out which signs were the same as which, and collapsing all of that variation into what turned out to be a pretty simple and straightforward system that had its own rules, that had its own very elegant structure, and it wasn't as esoteric and as varied as we actually had thought, that yeah, *visually* it was complicated but once you organized that visual material into the system that existed it made perfect sense and you could predict things, you could really crack the code that way.

Q: In the syllabic signs in particular – I think the *u* sign has the most variants and maybe because it's both a very common personal pronoun and a common vowel. Talk about that, and then how also a lot of other syllabic signs turned out to have a lot of variants, which, in my understanding, is what really enabled you to start sort of opening the floodgates of the syllabic decipherment, that we were suddenly able to, by not assuming these things were something else, but then “maybe this is just a variant of this other one we've already discovered” and that collapsed the complexity of that.

David Stuart: Well, it turned out that the *u* sign had all of these variants, I don't know how many there are in total, there's only eight or nine different forms that you might be able to identify, and that's an unusually high number because most other syllables, we found out around that time period, maybe have two or three or four forms, usually no more than that. But identifying those, simply identifying those variants, allows you to do the structural analysis much more quickly, and once you know that you have three glyphs that all are the sound *na* and that they can freely substitute for each other in all of these different places, once you realize that, you're opening the door to all of these new readings, right. You have the possibilities of making new decipherments, and so it was really the realization of the inner structure of Maya writing in the mid '80s that led directly into a whole bunch of new decipherments.

Q: One of the things that helped you with your *u* decipherment was the Tablet of the 96 Glyphs and I think that might be a good example of how the scribes themselves would substitute within a given text, if they had a lot of repetition. Talk about how this began to make that kind of scribal play or aesthetic variations clear.

David Stuart: Well, one of the places where we really see how Maya scribes were thinking when they were composing a text and using these variant forms is this remarkable inscription, the Tablet of the 96 Glyphs at Palenque. It was this tablet that

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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Berlin had used to reconstruct part of the dynasty back in the 1960s, in fact, and there you find that the spelling of this verb *ut i* takes something like – I think there are four or five completely different-looking forms of the verb *ut i* where the scribe has decided to use a different head sign for *u*. There's the shark head, there's a monkey head, there is a human head, probably of a sacrificial victim. He's throwing out all of these really obscure forms. They had this repertoire of signs that they could draw on, and that this master calligrapher decided to play around, right. He was playing with this idea of using a different sign in each setting. Whenever the verb 'to happen' came up in his inscription, he was compelled to spell it in a different way each time. Well, actually he was spelling it the *same* way but using a different *u* element in each case. So we have to ask, why do Maya scribes feel like they have to do that all the time? That makes it incredibly complicated for us but to them – it was clearly part of the script. It wasn't only a system of writing to them. There was something more to it. There was an artistry and a playfulness that was as much a part of the system as the recording of language.

Q: You gave a paper in November of '84 in Denver about this. Do you recall that occasion and what that was like and how people responded to it when they first heard these ideas?

David Stuart: Yeah. I presented this paper in 1984 on the reading of the *ut* verb and it was one of scariest papers I ever had to give, because it was such a radical suggestion. It was throwing out Eric Thompson's long-beloved reading of this sign. Linda and I were at the meeting together and even Linda had a hard time accepting it, I remember. She was really resistant to it and then finally accepted it after several weeks of discussing and debating it.

But another person who was at that meeting was David Kelley, and I had met David I think a couple of times. I didn't really know him very well, but I knew his book. He had written one of the great books on Maya writing, where he talked about Thompson's *xoc* glyph and so forth, and so the funny thing was David had to give a summary of the session at this conference. So he had to go through all the papers and talk about them and apparently I was the only person who had provided a preview copy of the paper to David. No one else at that entire conference gave him the written version except for me, and so he spent the entire time at the end of that session talking about my paper, and he praised it but he said he didn't necessarily believe it. I think he liked the methodology behind it but at that time he thought it was a little too radical and that there maybe were other explanations to explain all of this. I was a little crestfallen after that, I have to admit, but I felt pretty confident about where this was leading, in terms of methods of approaching Maya texts.

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Q: Back after Knorosov's work had come to the United States, Eric Thompson -- one of his main arguments against Knorosov's was that if these syllabic decipherments he proposed were true, it would immediately unlock a flood of decipherment, and that that hadn't happened in the '50s and the '60s and the '70s. At this point, with that realization of variability in the script, doesn't that sort of open the floodgates of decipherment?

David Stuart: Right. Well, it's interesting looking back on that work in the mid '80s and really how it helped to resolve a conundrum that Eric Thompson had first brought up in the 1950s when he was criticizing Knorosov's approach to decipherment. One of the things that Thompson said, and very understandably, in his criticism was well, if we're just dealing with a simple syllabic script then why aren't we just reading all of these things all of a sudden, why doesn't it just all make sense to us, opening the floodgates of decipherment? That didn't happen, obviously, and Knorosov was certainly right in a lot of the things he was saying, but Knorosov, because he was working with a fairly limited set of data, he didn't see all of this variation.

I think what happened was, once we realized that Maya scribes were able to write things in the way they did, using all of these strange forms and variants of single signs, all of these variants of *u* and all of these variants of *ti* and all of these variants of *na* and *ba* and *ku*, once that system made itself clear, then the floodgates opened. So there was about a 30-year delay between Knorosov's realization and really understanding the system behind it. So in some ways Thompson was correct in that initial criticism but we fixed it, we fixed our understanding of the system in a way that made it confirm that Knorosov was right.

Q: Going back to the summer of 1984, Linda was living in a house with you, and you and I think your dad and Linda were working on what was going to be a book on Maya writing which may have been, as it turned out, premature, because things were changing and happening so fast, but I think it also was a difficult time for you and Linda. You were starting to grow up and feeling the strain of this and it was not an easy time being there. These are universal things, teachers and students and parents and kids. They go through these struggles...

David Stuart: Yeah. In 1984, the same year when all of these changes were happening in at least how I was understanding how Maya writing worked, we were so excited by what was happening that Linda and I and my father decided it was a good time to present a lot of these new things and do a book on Maya glyphs. So Linda came and lived with us for quite a few months in Washington, suburban Washington, at the house where my dad had his library and this was in between high school and college for me. So I had taken this time off partly to work on this project, and it was an interesting time because I

was working on a lot of these new readings. It was a really productive time for me and I was really excited by what was happening.

So Linda came and she started writing her chapters and I was working on my chapters, and one of the things that I think became pretty clear to me is that Linda and I had pretty different approaches about things on a lot of levels. I was, what, 19 years old, almost – yeah, 18, 19, in that year and still kind of becoming comfortable with being a Maya scholar or someone who focused on this arcane topic for a career, and Linda was this established figure, and we had had this long history, a deep friendship too, for many years, but part of that too I think was realizing that I was approaching things differently than she was, and that in some ways we had a very different understanding of what Maya writing was and how it worked. It sort of dawned on me that there was a little conflict going on here about how we decipher glyphs, and part of that was also I was becoming more and more independent from her in the way I looked at things. I was coming up with different ideas and we were disagreeing on stuff. But added to that mix was this, I think, normal breaking-away kind of process, where you have a mentor for many years, from a very young age, right, and as I was getting ready to go off to college I was mentally kind of breaking away from that connection in some ways, just the way any teenager would from an authority figure.

So it was an interesting time in that way, looking back on it. I kind of look at it more as an independence process on my part, and once I went off to college Linda and I saw each other quite a bit in Copán and in meetings and so forth but we didn't have the intensive relationship that we had had before that time.

Q: During that summer you presented her your decipherment of the *u* thing, and I think she resisted kind of heavily and you finally convinced her with the Quirigua – the use of the *u* bracket. Tell about that.

David Stuart: Well, in – when we were working on our book, that's when I was putting together a lot of the argument for the *u ti* reading and throwing out Thompson's old decipherment, and I was sort of working on this in secret, I remember, while Linda was there, because I felt like this was pretty radical stuff. So one day I got up the courage to sit down with Linda and say, "Look, Linda. I've been working on this pretty remarkable pattern. Let's take a look at this." And so I got out my graphs. I had made these graphs of signs and how they substitute all the *u* forms and all of the directional count glyphs, and it became very evident to me soon after I began showing her this stuff that she did not like what I was doing. One of her main objections was, how can you assume that a sign substituting for another sign means just a direct equivalent and she repeated to me, I remember it very clearly, she said, "One thing that Floyd taught me was that you can't

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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assume that a substitution means absolute equivalence,” and I remember it well. “Linda, I’m not assuming that. I think there’s really good evidence for it given that it’s in all of these different places, you see them operating the same way.”

And then I pulled out my kind of clincher, what I thought was the clinching evidence, which was the use of Landa’s *u* sign as the replacement for the *xok* fish and all of these other forms, and Linda looked at it and she said, “Boy, I don’t like this. I just don’t like this at all. But I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, and I’ll think about it.” And it took her about two or three weeks to become really comfortable with it and she got very excited, but I think she was also very wary of this idea that Maya writing was so playful that it could accommodate this. She kind of saw it as this is “aces wild”, we can propose equivalences between all sorts of things, right, and we were still kind of working out what the limitations were of this pattern, how variable was Maya writing and how much of it had really rigid rules, and at that point I wasn’t sure, and Linda wasn’t sure, but it took another few years to really define that much better.

Q: Yesterday when we were talking about when Linda first took you on and you said a couple of times, “I’ve never really understood why she did that kind of on the spur of the moment, saying ‘Come to Palenque with me.’” And Amy remarked to me afterward, she said, well, Linda was somebody who didn’t have kids of her own and didn’t have somebody to pass this energy on to. Did it occur to you at the time or does it occur to you now that that was a part of it, and that you occupied that role for her?

David Stuart: Yeah. I think even though I may not have been aware of it early on, I think Linda and I, because we were very close for several intense years there, and I was the age I was and she was when I first met her in her mid 30s into her – we worked closely up until her 50s and even later on, she was in a lot of ways to me kind of a mother figure. We spent a lot of time in Mexico together without my parents around and she was the one who kind of looked after me in a lot of ways and yeah, because she didn’t have kids, I have wondered if whether I filled that role for her in some ways during that time we were together, and she took really good care of me when we were together in Mexico City for a couple weeks at a time, say, and for that reason she’s always going to be one of those kind of fundamental people in my life. There are a handful of them, and Linda’s right up there, because she formed me in so many ways, professionally and also in a personal way because of that influence.

Q: I think you told me that much later on, when you guys had been apart for a while and got back together near the end of her life, I think you said to her that you’d never had to rebel against your parents but you think maybe you’d have to rebel against her at a certain point, and maybe this time of ’84, ’86, ’87 was the time that it happened.

David Stuart: Yeah, I remember a conversation that Linda and I had when she was dying and I came out to Austin a couple of times and one of the things I told her at that point was that some of the difficult times that we had gone through, the two of us, that part of that was sort of the idea of rebelling against authority and it was something I didn't do with my parents but I did it with Linda, and so I tried to explain to her that going through that time can be looked at in that way. Even though I didn't really do it with my mom and dad who I was always close to, I did do it with Linda, and we had a few laughs about that at that time.

The decipherment of the Primary Standard Sequence on Maya vases

Q: Let's talk about the progression of work that came out of the *u* decipherment, the work on the P.S.S., the *u tzib* glyph, Steve Houston and Karl Taube coming up with the *lak*, and leading into the *cacau*, and Barbara MacLeod working on a lot of these overall structures of the P.S.S. And leading ultimately into seeing the P.S.S. everywhere.

David Stuart: Yes. I started looking at the texts on pottery, these dedicatory texts, around 1983, and was working on a lot of the basic internal structure of it, you know, picking up where Mike Coe had left off about ten years before. And it was really in those next two or three years that a lot of the decipherment focused on those pottery texts. And it was a great way to do this comparative analysis, because we had hundreds of examples of this more or less formulated inscription that just repeated over and over again.

And so, for example, the glyph for to write, *tz'ib*, showed up all the time on these pots. It also means to paint, and they were probably using this word to say that this is a painted pot, as opposed to a carved pot, which would use a different glyph.

There was the glyph for the object itself. Karl Taube and Steve Houston had proposed that plates had this nametag on them just like we had seen with other objects. You know, "*u la ka*" spelling *u lak* for his plate or her plate. Yeah. So there were a lot of different people kind of working on different elements of it.

The other one that was important at this time was the glyph for chocolate, *kakaw*, which turns out to be all over there vessels. And it was in 1983-84, that I thought I found the *kakaw* glyph on these vessels. And it turned out that one was excavated down in Guatemala with a lid on it with residue inside that got tested scientifically and it turned out to be chocolate.

Q: Your dad actually went into the tomb, when they found that. You were shown the pot?

David Stuart: Well, I was looking at photographs of it.

Q: Just tell me that story.

David Stuart: O.k. Well, I think it was in 1983, luckily, around this very same time when so much was going on, that a remarkable find was made at a site called Río Azul down in Guatemala. And it was of a beautiful Maya pot, early classic Maya vessel that had this strange lid on it. You don't find many lidded vessels, especially with this kind of lid. It was a lock-top jar. You could hold it suspended by its handle from above, and it was beautifully painted, with these glyph medallions all around it.

And I saw photographs of this pot and was really excited, because there were two examples of this glyph that I had thought for a few months, at that point, simply said *kakaw*, the Maya word for chocolate. And so I said this. I told this to the archeologist, Dick Adams, Richard Adams, who was in charge of the Río Azul excavations. And it was Adams and his graduate student, Grant Hall, who was digging the tombs at Rio Azul, who decided to test this theory, because this jar had this residue on the inside of it. It was well preserved, because it was kind of a lock-top lid, right. It hadn't all dissipated.

So they sent samples of this powdery substance to the Hershey labs in Hershey, Pennsylvania. What better place to send a sample of something that could be chocolate? And as luck would have it, it came back positive, theobroma cacao. The chemical signatures were there. So that really confirmed what, to me, had been pretty obvious, that the glyph was the glyph for chocolate. And that these were all chocolate containers. A lot of these Maya pots were for a cacao drink.

Q: Around this time, and Barbara MacLeod, I think, was involved in this, it began to become clear, '84 to '87, what the overall structure of P.S.S. was, and what it was saying and how it functioned. Tell us about that and a couple of examples of the kind of ways in which it played out.

David Stuart: Yeah. Well, in the mid-'80s, it was pretty clear what the internal structure was of the Primary Standard Sequence, this dedicatory formula. And I had been working on it for several years and saw the basic, general structure of it, which I presented in 1986. And Barbara MacLeod, who was a student here at the University of Texas, with Linda, was starting work on her PhD thesis on this formulated text and working out a lot of the details of it. So some of us started coming at it from different

directions and looking at it in very similar ways. There was kind of a core group of Maya glyph students and epigraphers who really wanted to focus on this set of material, because it so much fun. You could see the substitutions going on. And so, yeah, I mean, Steve Houston, Barbara MacLeod, me, and Karl Taube, and it was a really interesting time around that period.

The internal structure was basically that it was a nametag. It was very much like these other ones that were maybe a little more simple, that said, “her, your spool, or “his bone implement.” But these were saying “his plate” or “her drinking cup” and they would add some more information to that. They could say it was her drinking cup for chocolate drink, or for corn atole, this maize gruel drink. They could also say something about the vessel. They could say, “here is dedicated the painted drinking cup for cacao” or “the carved drinking cup for maize gruel atole”. So they were adding all sorts of information. It was basic core understanding of it being a nametag for something, relating an object to a person, to its owner. So from that came a lot of really interesting things. The glyph for “to paint” – from that you can identify artists’ signatures on the pottery. There were artists who are actually signing their works. The glyph for “carve,” that’s all over the monuments. Again, the signatures. We were finding carved signatures on stelae, which I wrote in my undergraduate thesis about at Princeton. And so it was starting to get a little overwhelming in terms of what we could, all of a sudden, kind of *read*. I mean, we were looking at all of this material and there was a lot of stuff to absorb at that time.

Q: Great. 1985, you went to Princeton.

David Stuart: Yeah.

Q: I think you had been already, or at that time, you started corresponding heavily with Steve Houston. You and Steve and Nikolai, a lot of correspondence started up around that time.

David Stuart: Yeah. Nikolai came later, because I didn’t meet him until a little later. Yeah.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about what was going on there, in this period of correspondence, when things worked out by letter.

David Stuart: Right.

Q: And now we have this internet web but then it was these long, handwritten letters.

David Stuart: Right.

Q: Talk about that.

David Stuart: Well, I entered Princeton in 1985. It was right after that time of working on the book with Linda Schele and my father, and that was a big transition for me. But I still was focusing a lot on Maya glyphs in my spare time. And I had struck up a really tight relationship with Steve Houston, who was one of Mike Coe's grad students. And Steve and I were working on things in a kind of similar way. I noticed very quickly that he and I had similar approaches to things, and similar mind sets, and he and Karl Taube had been at Yale working together and had come up with a lot of really interesting stuff.

We started corresponding quite a bit around 1983, 1984. There were a lot of intense letters going back and forth about the Primary Standard Sequence, about, kings' names at Dos Pilas, where Steve was doing his dissertation work, a lot of different things, and we were writing letters. I was actually using a typewriter to write letters when I was 18 or so. I guess it was the end of that era, right, because it was right before email. And I didn't start using email until probably '88, '89, which was pretty early, I think, for email, in general. But, yeah, Steve and I wrote letters to each other, and there was sort of a tradition within Maya glyph studies. I remember Linda was a big part of this, too, in the '70s, where long, kind of intense letters about glyph readings and glyph patterns would be circulated. So Linda would write one to Floyd Lounsbury and she would make Xeroxes of those and maybe send them to Peter Mathews and send them to me. And Peter Mathews would write a letter back. And these would get circulated around. I think Steve saw a lot of the letters that Floyd was writing, and so we kind of struck up our own kind of underground correspondence. And Steve and I really clicked. We really saw things the same way. And that started a very close correspondence and he's been a close colleague ever since.

Q: 1986, there's the *Blood of Kings* show, I think, in the spring. And then in the summer, I guess, is the Mesa Redonda, and I think that's when you first met Nikolai, actually.

David Stuart: Um hm.

Q: During that Mesa Redonda, there was a lot of people working on the P.S.S. together.

David Stuart: Yeah.

Q: So let's talk a bit about that period and things, begin with that.

David Stuart: The Mesa Redonda?

Q: Yeah. If you could begin with the Mesa Redonda.

David Stuart: Yeah. 1986, that was another one of these really intense years when things were clicking. And there was a Mesa Redonda at Palenque that year, that I attended. And that was where I first met Nikolai Grube. And Nikolai – it was interesting. He gave a paper on the Primary Standard Sequence, which I had been working on for several years, and I remember him giving that paper at the Mesa Redonda. And he had worked out a lot of the internal relationships, “this sign kind of fills the same structural niche as this sign, as this sign”. But it was purely structural. There was no interpretation. He didn’t know what it was about. It was really picking up where Mike Coe, again, had left off.

And so I remember taking Nikolai aside after his paper, saying Nikolai, I think we’ve got – these are nametags. This is chocolate. This is the glyph for to write and to carve, and so forth. So he really, I think, saw that as the key. And kind of took that and ran with it. And so he published a paper later on about the internal meaning of the Primary Standard Sequence.

And it was also that summer that right after the Mesa Redonda, that I went directly to Copán with Bill Fash. And Bill had invited me and Linda down too.

Q: Your conference on epigraphy in Guatemala happens first, I believe.

David Stuart: No, no. That was later in the summer.

His work at Copán, beginning in 1986

Q: O.K. Well, let’s take those in order then. Let’s talk about Copán, about your being invited down there. Linda had been there the previous summer, I believe, hadn’t she?

David Stuart: Linda had been there, yeah.

Q: Let’s talk about your going to Copán, and how Copán was different for you. When we talked about it before you said that Copán was “the cruelest site”.

David Stuart: Yeah.

Q: Tell us what you mean by that, and how different it is. I mean, even now, looking at these texts, the readings that exist. They’re so different, and more difficult than a lot of other places.

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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David Stuart: Well, one of the things in 1986 that happened was that Bill Fash, my good friend and colleague, invited me and Linda down to Copán to spend the summer and work on Copán glyphs and some of the sculpture mosaics that they were finding in Copán that had inscriptions on them, and on the hieroglyphic stairway. There were all of these things that really needed to be looked at. So, sure, let's go.

We went down, and I spent about two months there that summer. And leading up to that, I think I think one of the reasons that Bill wanted me down there, was because I had been working on the dynasty of Copán a couple of years earlier, when I was doing all these other things. Working out the late Classic kings, refining the dynasty as it had been understood, because really it was bare bones stuff that people had known about the Copán kings. And one of the most important things that I had proposed was that there was this king, the first king of Copán, that his name was Yax Kuk Mo, he was the founder of the dynasty.

So Bill and I had corresponded about this in 1984 and Bill had gotten very excited. So, you know, "come on down". And I had never been to Copán before. And I go to this site. I had been to Palenque plenty of times. I had been to Yucatán. Copán was a very different place for me. It was in the mountains, pine trees up on the hills. It looked kind of like North Carolina, where I had grown up. And here was a beautiful site, inscriptions everywhere you looked. Big inscriptions on the pyramids, little inscriptions on little fragments of stone lying around on the grass. It was just mind boggling. And that summer, Linda and I did a lot of things. We started looking at the hieroglyphic stairway. One of the things that I started focusing on, were these fragments, these little fragments of stone lying around that had tiny glyphs on them that were part of these stone vessels. I was really interested in glyphs on pottery, right. So I thought, well, these are kind of stone versions of Maya pots.

Q: Before we get to that – What's different about the texts at Copán?

David Stuart: Well, when I got to Copán, it was a very different place for me in a lot of ways. I had been used to Palenque and sites up in Yucatán, and I had known Copán based on the drawings. But to see the site, and to see how beautiful it was, was just a mind-boggling experience. But there was another thing going on there, too, which was that I had never been comfortable with Copán. Knowing the texts just from the drawings that had been published, I knew they were really ornate. They were really opaque. I mean, they were different from Palenque. They weren't these kind of grand, narrative epics of creation mythology and kings doing rituals and linking themselves to the founding gods. These tablets at Palenque had these great stories to tell. Copán's inscriptions were shorter, pretty much. Just visually, they were a lot more baroque

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looking. And Maya glyphs are pretty baroque looking to begin with! Copán kind of went the extra mile to make them visually more complicated.

So I resisted Copán in a lot of ways. And so the invitation to go down there, when Bill Fash invited me and Linda, it was like, O.K., let's go. I'm interested in Copán. I had worked out some of the dynastic history, the founder, Yax Kuk Mo, was something that I had written Bill about in '84. And I kind of felt like I was getting into Copán a little bit, but there was a wall there, definitely. And it was the right time to look at Copán, because at that point, with all of the work on this variability in Maya writing, as soon as I really started looking at Copán inscriptions, I saw that, O.K., they are saying the same thing here, and the same thing on this stela, and the same thing on that stela. It might look really different, but pretty much it's the same thing. And so it was really a similar process of just being with the inscriptions and working on them. In pretty short order, it was very clear what was going on with the Copán texts.

Q: To make that distinction a little clearer of what's different about Copán, you described to me that in Palenque texts and a lot of other sites, it has a very regular structure. You got a distance number, and a basic sum, and then another one...

David Stuart: Right. One of the things about Copán that was troublesome for me – I knew the inscriptions from the drawings, but I kind of avoided them in some ways, because they were so different from what I was used to in looking at Palenque or Yaxchilan, or some of these other sites.

At Palenque and Yaxchilan and Tikal, you tend to see straightforward snippets of information presented, where you'll have an historical episode. So many days later, this happens. And so many days later this other thing happens. Well, at Copán, it was very clear that something else was going on there, that you had fairly short inscriptions sometimes on monuments, but with really ornate signs. Different in some ways, more baroque looking than what I was used to at that point.

There were long texts, too. I mean, sometimes they would, without breaking stride in their narratives, they would just have these long sequences without any kind of break for dates, and episodes. So you would go on for 80, 90, a 100, glyph blocks without any kind of break down. You couldn't parse that into a narrative. They just went on and on and on talking about something. I wasn't sure what. So we were kind of confronted with that. And the visual complexity of Copán's inscriptions added to the mix of this complexity. I mean, it was kind of a cruel situation for us, because we were all excited about what we were doing with Maya glyphs, and then we get to Copán and it's like, wait

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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a minute. This stuff is a little strange. And it's like we have to go an extra couple of steps to really understand what's going on there.

Q: Let's talk about your first day at Copán, when you walk into the *bodega* and see these fragments of incense burners.

David Stuart: Well, when I first got to Copán that summer, I remember that exciting day a little bit, of going into the ruins for the first time. Never been there before. There was this storage area, a *bodega*, for sculpture at Copán that we visited as part of that first day. There were the ruins themselves, but then a lot of the treasures of Copán were stored in this *bodega* area. So Linda and I were wandering around and she had been there before, so it wasn't so much new to her, but I remember seeing these really interesting, inscribed fragments of stone, kind of lying around on the ground and on the floor. And there were glyphs on them and some of them fit together. Some of them were just in pieces. And they were fragments of these fairly large stone vessels, kind of a strange kind of monument that you find only at Copán. And I was interested in glyphs on pottery, and the dedicatory texts on pottery. And we had just basically worked out a lot of that stuff.

And so I was looking at these things, and I got very excited because on about three or four of them that were there right in front of me, I could see the same glyph repeating, one after another. They looked really different. It's not like it was obvious they were the same. But if you read them off phonetically, and if you knew the variants that the scribes were using, you could just read them off. And it said, "*u sak lak tun, u sak lak tun.*" Which means something like "his stone dish", "his stone vessel", which is a perfect description for this kind of monument. It was yet another example of one of these nametags. It really did indicate to me that at least this set of Copán inscriptions was acting just like the others. They are talking about the objects. They are talking about the monuments and they are talking about the dedications of the objects themselves.

Q: A few days later, I think - because that was Copán Note No. 2, and not too much varied in the sequences - Altar U, in the Copan City Museum, you discover a similar structure operating. Could you talk about that?

David Stuart: Well, at that time, working at Copán, there was sort of a daily "eureka" moment. Working with the inscriptions at the site, or in the warehouse there. Having seen that there was this basic dedicatory focus on at least some Copán things, we started looking at the altars and the stela. And I remember one of the altars at Copán, Altar U, had a "stone" glyph on it, just like the stone vessels. Of course, it wasn't called a stone vessel. It was called something else. And I noticed there was this glyph that said

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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“*Kinich*.” *Kinich* is a title that kings have, but it’s also a word that literally has been translated as Sun-Eyed, or to have the eye of the sun, “*kin*” and “*ich*.” Now, there’s some problems with that particular reading, but when I was walking around that altar, “*Kinich* something *tun*”, “the sun-eyed stone” – I walked around it with Linda and sure enough, looking at the big face carved on the front of this altar, in the eyes of this huge face were two “*kin*” or sun glyphs! And so I remember that moment. I said, Linda, come around here. Come around the front of this stone and take a look, because we had both been talking about this and it was like, oh, my God. There it is. I mean, how more direct could you get! There are the “sun eyes” on the monument. So it was clearly the proper name for the object was being recorded in the text.

Q: There was also, on the front of that monument, a mat symbol on the forehead.

David Stuart: Well, one of the nice parts about looking at that Altar U inscription, was to see that it had this proper name. *Kinich* or sun-eyed, throne, the sign that seems to be something like throne, although we can’t read it now, and *tun*. So Linda and I, remember, were looking at it. Sun-eyed throne stone. What is that? That doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. And so I remember that day kind of walking around the stone and I walked out in the front of it and I looked down and there’s this big face carved on the altar, this huge kind of monstrous face. Two huge eyes. And inside the eyes are these big “*kin*” or sun glyphs. And so, you know. And then there’s on top of that kind of the throne design, going across like a headband across the face. And so, Linda, come over here. And so we looked at this and I said, Linda, there’s the *Kinich*. There’s the throne and here’s the stone. And it was one of these wonderful moments where you could just connect with the Maya, you know. And, of course, it’s obvious and it doesn’t tell you a whole lot about their culture or their civilization, but they were able to just name these things in ways that we could perceive today. But that’s what I thought was so wonderful about it.

Q: You also found that altars had the word for altar, stelas had the word for stela.

David Stuart: Yeah.

Q: And sometimes were named.

David Stuart: Right. Stelae, yeah. That very same summer, looking at all of these different kinds of stone monuments at Copán – we’d looked at these stone vessels. We looked at altars. We looked at stelae. And it got to be a fairly straightforward process of looking at the core units of these inscriptions and seeing that they were self-referential, that is they contained glyphs for the objects. So, sure enough, a lot of the stelae, had this

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stone glyph, the word “*tun*” with this funny sign in front of it. But it only appeared on stelae, whereas these stone vessels had their kind of glyph and altars had their kind of glyph. We very quickly identified this as the stelae glyph. And that, again, was very exciting, because we were just accumulating, almost everyday, a new term that the Maya used for the sacred objects of their built environment, for their temples, and for their monuments. Maybe not always the actual *words* that the Maya used, because sometimes that took time to decipher. But at least we recognized what we were supposed to look at.

Q: I'd like to go back to use that part about describing the *bodega*. The *bodega* at Copán is kind of remarkable, even more than sites like Palenque, that there were thousands and thousands of these things all over the ground from the Carnegie days. And they are in these incredible rows upon rows. Can you describe that treasure house, and what you saw in there, just in general terms when you walk into this place.

David Stuart: The storehouse in Copán for the sculpture is one of the most remarkable archeological monuments, I think, just by itself. It's grown over the years. I mean, in 1986, it was really nothing compared to what it is now. There's been a lot of excavation since then. If you go in there, it's like a library. It's been described by my friend, Bill Fash, as this library in stone, because you have these rows and rows of shelves with blocks of stone on them. And the blocks have glyphs. The blocks have architectural sculpture from the mosaics on the facades of buildings and each temple has its own room, or own section in the warehouse there. So it's really an incredible place. When I was there initially in the mid or late '80s, it was a wonderful place to work, because it was kind of the center of activity for a lot of the archeologists working at Copán. And as temples were being dug, a lot of these fallen carved blocks off the temples would be catalogued very carefully, drawn and photographed, and taken up and stored in this place. So for the study of Maya architecture, not to mention the study of Maya glyphs, that warehouse is just a treasure house of material.

Q: We'd like to talk in a little bit more detail about your decipherment of the stelae, the leaf component in it.

David Stuart: Kind of a leafy plant in front of stone, yeah.

Q: It took a while to get to the right reading for that. Could you talk about that?

David Stuart: Well, in '86 we identified the stelae glyph. We knew that this glyph had to mean stelae in some sense. I mean, stone was the main part of it. It was “the something stone”. And the part that we had trouble with, it looks like a representation of kind of a bent branch, or a bent tree. It's kind of hard to tell exactly what it is, in fact.

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And we got on the wrong track in a way, with that reading, because it looked sort of like a tree, so I remember Linda saying, well, you know, this is probably “*te*”, that’s the Maya word for tree. So *te tun*. And tree stone, like these stelae were trees of stone, and to us that was a very powerful kind of metaphor. What a wonderful way to describe these monuments, right?

Well, it turned out that that was wrong. And this is what happens in our line of business, is we’re not always right about a decipherment. It turned out that that sign couldn’t mean tree. I was never really happy with it, frankly, because it never meant tree anywhere else. We had another sign that meant tree. So what happened was about, oh, six or seven years later, I noticed that there were some places where this mysterious sign had a “*ma*” suffix. And I thought, well, that’s interesting. Maybe it’s not “*te*”, maybe it’s a word that ends in the sound “*m*” or the letter “*m*.” And then at Copán on a particular stela, there is the word spelled with the syllables “*la ka ma*” in front of *tun*, in front of stone. And so I thought, well, maybe this is the full spelling of that mysterious word. Maybe it’s “*lakam tun*.” And “*lakam tun*” means simply big stone, big rock. And that’s what the Maya were calling the stelae, rather than this metaphorical term, stone trees, which in some ways might be preferable. We like to think that they were poetic there. That’s not the case at all. They are just simply calling them big rocks.

Q: Did they read that as ‘banner stone’?

David Stuart: Well, “*lakam*” also means banner. O.k. I can talk about that.

Q: And also which was the monument that you got those phonetic meanings?

David Stuart: It was Stela A at Copán that had this long inscription on its back that included the word “*lakam tun*” spelled out with the syllables. It was very clear that’s what it was saying. And if you look up the word “*lakam*” in the dictionary, it has two meanings. It can mean banner or flag, which, you know, may or may not apply. I mean, they could be calling stelae stone flags or stone kind of flag poles, a little strange, but there might be some overlap there. But “*lakam*” is also an adjective. It just simply means big or wide. So “*lakam tun*” is something like big stone or wide stone which, personally, I prefer as the translation of that word, rather than some poetic metaphor. They are simply just calling them big rocks.

Q: As you see these nametags on more and more things, I think – this comes out in maybe your thesis, it becomes clearer to you that, or you begin to start to think that – you said it’s all name-tagging here.

David Stuart: Yeah.

Q: Even the big inscriptions at Palenque, the big historical texts, all lead up to, they belong to so and so.

David Stuart: Right.

Q: Could you talk about the overview of the whole thing, it began with these little things on tiny, little objects like ear spools. Is that changing the way you look at all Maya texts?

David Stuart: When I was looking at Copán's inscriptions, it, of course, became very clear that what we were looking at were elaborate nametags on stone monuments, just like we saw on pottery, on ear spools, and bone implements. So it was this really important genre of writing that really cross-cut the medium. And that raised a really interesting question in my mind, which was "why is this so different from what we were looking at Palenque, or Yaxchilan?"

And it turns out that those longer narrative texts at Palenque, for example, in some ways they *are* the same because if you look at them, they almost always culminate, in the last section, in some sort of dedicatory statement. So they can be talking about histories of kings and at Yaxchilan will talk about wars and battles and all of this stuff, and then they'll say, and "then the temple was dedicated. It's the temple of so and so, where these inscriptions are found".

And that, to me, is really the core unit of Maya writing in its origin. I think it's probably a really old and archaic way that the Maya wrote, that maybe even the motivation for writing could have begun with wanting to label objects and label owners. And then they kind of expanded from that, right. So at Palenque and Yaxchilan, they expanded on that by putting it in history, by making those dedications and those objects important players in the local histories, so they become - the kings and the queens - the subjects of these great historical events.

Q: Do you mean we get histories that begin with creation....

David Stuart: At Palenque we even see in some of these mythological texts, they're talking about the creation of the world, right, and all of these elaborate events involving the gods. And then they get into the historical time period, and talk about so many kings doing things and coming to office. This is history on the grandest scale. And then that will culminate in mention of the dedication of a temple, or the dedication of a stone monument that you're reading. So they are always focused on the object or on the pyramid, and they are putting it in this cosmological context when they're doing that.

They're anchoring these mundane objects – or what we might think are mundane things like buildings, or even portable objects – they're anchoring those in kind of a cosmological setting.

Q: Another reading that came up, it sort of began a little bit earlier, that culminated I think that first summer at Copán, was the *witz* reading, about mountains. Can you talk about that reading and how it changed your sense of Maya sacred geography. And also how it worked into the way in which ethnography informs, or the modern Maya informs, the understanding of the ancient Maya.

David Stuart: Right. Well, it was at that same time, that same summer in 1986 in Copán, that I found really the clinching evidence for a reading that I had thought about for a couple of years. And this was the word for “hill” or “mountain”. The Maya word is “*witz*.” I remember one day in Copán coming upon a couple of interesting places where they talked about a particular place, a location, called “Macaw” – and then there was this weird glyph that kind of looked like a “stone” glyph, but it had a different outline. It had a different feel to it. It wasn't clearly “stone”, but something related to that. So: “Macaw... something”. And then in another inscription, very parallel to that, there was the word for Macaw, *mo*, and then lo and behold there were two syllables, “*wi tz*”, “*witz*.”

And “*witz*” is, of course, the word for hill or mountain, and so that provided the evidence that this mystery sign that looked like the glyph for stone, was actually the glyph for mountain. *Mo witz*, “Macaw mountain”. And that was probably a sacred mountain that was venerated by the people of Copán. Well, this opened up so many things, because one of the things that we had known, just reading about the modern Maya and knowing the modern Maya, was that mountains are some of the most sacred places on the landscape. So many rituals are performed either in front of mountains, on tops of mountains, or insides of mountains and in caves. They are really the ceremonial nodes of activity in the landscape for a lot of modern Maya people. And so we could connect the ancient Maya to the modern Maya in some really remarkable ways, and see some of the continuities.

Q: At Copán, there's also evidence that the temples, themselves, were being referred to as mountains.

David Stuart: Yeah.

Q: And Temple 22 is a good example of that. And there's other examples going up to the Puuc Region and so forth.

David Stuart: Yeah, exactly.

Q: That these are mountains, and that their entrances are entrances to the caves, to the underworld. Could you talk about that.

David Stuart: Looking at the ways that the Maya talked about mountains in their inscriptions at Copán, we had these references to at least two sacred mountains. One of them was this Macaw Mountain, *Mo Witz*, they called it. And looking at some of the ways they wrote this, it became very clear to me that some of the pyramids at Copán were actually named as mountains. They could have the proper names of mountains, and probably the best example of that is this very ornate building at Copán that we now know as Temple 22. It had these big masks on the corners showing these animate kind of grotesque faces that were the Maya way of showing an animate mountain. That was the spirit of the mountain. And so Temple 22 was being labeled visually as this huge, cosmic mountain, this mountain of sustenance. And the doorway of the temple, you walk into the doorway, and it's a big mouth. It has big fangs and teeth around it. That's the cave. You're walking into the mountain. You're walking into the cave, into the sacred space. And then there's all this elaborate carving on the inside, as well.

So just a simple decipherment of a word like *witz*, like mountain – and this has happened so many different times – it takes you into all of this amazing understanding of how the Maya saw their world, of how the Maya built their world and reproduced the sacred landscape in their own architecture. And you start to understand even the motivations behind a lot of the things that they produced, their monuments and their theology.

Q: The *witz* sign, in its more elaborate manifestations, you saw this in the thing that Chan Bahlum is standing on, in the Temple of the Foliated Cross. And it has these stone markings and the corn and all these things that one would find on the Maya landscape. Could you talk about that in a little more detail?

David Stuart: Working directly from the glyphs, it became very easy to identify how Maya artists represented mountains in their art. They didn't show a natural landscape ever when they were wanting to reproduce the image of a mountain. You never see this in Maya art. Rather, they show the spirit of the mountain. They give it personality. And so you see this almost animalistic form with big eyes, a large snout. You see the markings on the body or on the head of the mountain spirit, which are the markings of stone. The reason that mountain glyph looks like a stone glyph is because mountains are made of stone, and they're showing you that. And you see corn. You see maize just billowing out of the cleft at the top of the mountain. So these are the mountains of sustenance. Mountains are where things happen. Mountains are where everything comes

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from. It's where rain comes from. It's where maize comes from. It is really the centerpiece of the Maya universe in a lot of ways. And the classic Maya were showing mountains all the time.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about how doorways are similar to caves, and how they represent that influence into the place where – both sides of the underworld, the place of the spirits and the dead. It's also the place where the sustenance, the water and the corn, come from, from inside the earth. Can you talk about that some?

David Stuart: Yeah.

Q: At some point, you might want to do it now, I'd like to talk about the *ch'en* glyphs, and what you were saying about that. I know it's a jump in time, but it relates to the same complex.

David Stuart: Something you see a lot in Maya architecture, like this temple at Copán, Temple 22, is that they will show the doorways as a big mouth, a mouth of the mountain. And this is a symbol that goes way back in Mesoamerican art, even before the Maya, back to the Olmec, where they show the opening of the mountain, the cave as the mouth of the mountain spirit. So when you enter a cave or enter a temple that is an artificial mountain, you're walking in a cave. You're walking into a space that is the interior of the earth. It's hard for us to think of buildings that way, right, where you walk into a room and conceptually you're in the underworld. And think of that in a Maya temple. You're in this sort of dark space. There's all of this very heavy ritual art around you in these temples. And the Maya were constantly representing space in this way, replicating space. So you walk into one of these mountains. And Temple 22 at Copán, you're inside the underworld when you're there, but if you walk on the outside and you look at it, you also see maize, corn. It's just bursting forth out of the mountain. So they reproduced in that one building the whole operating principle, really, of the Maya universe, this idea of the underworld where the ancestors dwell, and it's the ancestors who kind of provide the seeds and the energy and the life force that is responsible for the sprouting of maize, that basic substance of life for the Maya, bursting out of the mountain. It's a very powerful image.

Q: Great. Could you talk some about Evon Vogt. You worked with him. I don't know if that book is every going to be finished...

David Stuart: I hope it will be.

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Q: You collaborated with him. And he, way back before anyone else, in his work in Zinacantan, and so forth, proposed what was then, I guess, a somewhat radical idea that the modern Maya had a lot to teach about the ancient Maya, which is now taken for granted. It's an obvious thing.

David Stuart: That's right.

Q: It was a radical idea then. And a lot of this work about mountains and so forth came out of his work at Zinacantan.

David Stuart: That's right.

Q: He makes this very clear.

David Stuart: Well, when I was working on the mountain glyph and looking at the symbolism of mountains, one of the books that I constantly reached for off the shelf was a book by Evon Vogt, at Harvard University, who wrote this great book on the Tzotzil Maya Indians of highland Chiapas. And Evon Vogt, or Vogtie, as many people called him, his good friends, Vogtie was a remarkable man. I got to know him later when I went to Harvard. Vogtie was at Harvard. He was the Emeritus Professor of Anthropology, one of the most famous Maya anthropologists. And I read so much of his stuff, and it was an honor to get to know him and work with him very closely later on. I found it so wonderful that the things I was seeing, working with the glyphs and working with the symbolism of Maya buildings and so forth, dovetailed exactly with what Vogti had said before. In fact, I was reading his earlier work that he had written in the '60s and '70s.

And he talked about well, you know, maybe Maya pyramids actually were artificial mountains. Maybe a lot of the figures we see in Maya art are ancestors. And this was, at the time, before I ever got into this business, that was a radical idea. And now we take it for granted. Vogtie did so much to bring the modern Maya and the ancient Maya together conceptually, and in some ways we came at the same understanding from two different directions. He came at it from the modern Maya. I and others have come at it from the ancient Maya, and we've reached this common ground.

Q: Great. Let's talk some about the quest for Yax Kuk Mo. And your reading of the text on the top of that altar, happened before you got to Copán.

David Stuart: Yeah.

Q: That's in your correspondence with Bill Fash, that how Bill Fash became conscious of your interest in Copán.

David Stuart: In 1984, I had worked with some of the Copán inscriptions before ever having gotten to Copán, and I remember looking at this interesting question of a historical name. There was a name that Floyd Lounsbury was the first to really identify in the Copán texts. He thought it might be a ruler of Copán from the late classic. He wasn't exactly sure. But it seemed to be a name like Quetzal Macaw, Kuk Mo, with these two bird glyphs. But he wasn't sure who this was. He wasn't sure if it was a late king of Copán, or exactly who, maybe even a god.

Well, in '84 I was looking at Copán, and playing around with as much as I could of Copán. It was a very difficult body of work to deal with. But looking at Altar Q, and the inscription on the top of Altar Q, I noticed that they seemed to be saying there that Quetzal Macaw – we now call him Yax Kuk Mo – that he was an early king of Copán, from a couple of hundred years before Altar Q was ever dedicated. And the more I looked at this evidence, the more clear it became to me that Kinich Yax Kuk Mo was probably the first king, or one of the very first kings, of Copán, who was celebrated by a lot of his descendants and successors in office, really a cult figure on the Copán scene. So I wrote Bill Fash about this, and some of my ideas about the dynasty, and that Kinich Yax Kuk Mo looks to be an early, early king of Copán.

Well, Linda and I are in Copán in 1986, along with Bill Fash and Barbara Fash, and one of the exciting days, one of many exciting days that summer, was being in front of the real Altar Q there in the acropolis. And it was a strange moment there, because Linda and I weren't necessarily talking about the altar. We were both looking at the altar just one afternoon. I guess we were kind of wandering around together. And I remember this very well. We were looking at the stone, and we both looked at each other, because we had seen exactly the same thing, which was that one of the figures on Altar Q has a Quetzal bird in his headdress. And the Quetzal bird has little macaw eye markings around it's own eye. And it has a *yax* glyph there, and it has a *kin* glyph there. And all it was in the headdress of that figure, this iconic way of writing the name, Kinich Yax Kuk Mo, Quetzal Macaw. That was him. And he was the first king in the sequence of the 16 rulers depicted on that monument. So Linda and I just looked at each other and gave each other a big hug, because we realized at that moment just together, without even speaking, that here was the clincher, right, that Yax Kuk Mo wasn't only an early king of Copán, but he was the first one that they were talking about.

Q: And what happens is they begin to excavate into this temple.

David Stuart: Right.

Q: First of all, there's a lot of resistance to this idea because the general feeling about Copán is that they couldn't have 16 historical kings. There wasn't enough in the ground to support that.

David Stuart: Well, in 1986 at Copán, there had been a lot of archeology done, but not a lot of deep archeology within the acropolis there. The surface had been worked on mainly. And here we were. I was proposing that there was this early king, a very important guy, who lived in the 5th century, long before there was really any evidence for anything happening at Copán. So the archeologists were saying, oh, well, this is really interesting but, gee, we don't any physical evidence that there were kings at Copán at this time. It seems to be a much shorter time period that we're dealing with.

And there were some archeologists, in particular, who were very opinionated about this and said, well, you know, he's probably mythical, you know. He's probably not from Copán, or they're just giving you this propaganda, talking about this great, early king. And that was where it stayed for quite a while. The glyphs were saying one thing. The archeology was incomplete. It wasn't necessarily saying it wasn't true, but there was just no evidence.

Well, in the late '80s and early '90s, my good friend and colleague, Bob Sharer, from the University of Pennsylvania, started his program of excavations, tunneling into the acropolis of Copán, and tunneling under Temple 16. Temple 16 is where Altar Q was. And that temple always interested me, because that's where the whole dynasty was depicted. And there was this building with some of this foreign looking symbolism that was associated with this founding king. And there had been a lot of excavations inside Temple 16, but the deeper and deeper you got, the more interesting it became, because you were getting back into the time of Yax Kuk Mo. And there were temples. There were buildings. There were plazas. There were monuments revealed by these excavations.

Q: O.K. Let's talk about the Copán Notes, how they got started and exactly what they were. I never have been clear about – was there a stack of them sitting around the side, or were they passed out to everybody in the morning, or how did they physically work in terms of getting done and getting out there?

David Stuart: The summer of '86, when Linda and I were down there together, we were having so many new ideas that, I think it was one afternoon in the Hotel Marina down there where both Linda and I were staying, that I suggested that we put out some informal

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reports about what we were coming up with. And, you know, this had been something that previous Maya archeologists had done with the Carnegie Institution of Washington, these very famous Carnegie Notes, these short, little papers about sometimes unimportant things, sometimes very important things. But we felt like it was – just to organize the stuff we were coming up with – it was maybe a good idea to start these things.

So that's how the Copán Notes were born that summer. And the first few of them were produced at Copán, using kind of a cheap, dot matrix printer, and Linda's little computer. I mean, before there were real laptops there were these kind of little computers back in the mid-'80s you could get. So she had one, and the first few were produced in her hotel room at the Hotel Marina. So there was one on the glyph for stela, there was one on the glyph for *sak lak tun*, these stone vessels at Copán. And they were short and sweet for the most part, just kind of laying out the evidence for something, and we Xeroxed them in the little tin photocopiers they had down in Copán, and handed them out to the archeologists working there with us.

And then when Linda got back to Austin she, I think, cleaned up a lot of them and made them available to her students, and to people coming to the Austin workshops. In a matter of a couple of years, they really kind of took off and had a life of their own, not really as formal publications, but really just as reports of what we were up to. And there were well over a hundred of them produced over several years by lots of different people. It was not just Linda, and not just me, even though we wrote the first ones to get things going. A bunch of people contributed to the Copán Notes, and they're kind of strange to look back on because they weren't really publications. They were just sort of informal write-ups of ideas. A lot of times they were half-baked ideas, and meant to be half-baked. Sometimes they were ideas that I felt were so half-baked that they shouldn't be written up, so sometimes Linda was like, gosh, we got to get this idea on paper and would literally the same hour of having an idea, you'd have a Copán note come out of the printer. And sometimes I was like well, gosh, maybe we should wait until we get back and we can check out this idea with looking at Palenque inscriptions or something.

So we had different working styles. I was definitely kind of more slow in wanting to consider some of the ideas we were coming up with. A good example of that is maybe the glyph for stela which Linda was sure was *te tun*, tree stone, and I was kind of resistant to it, and I think if we had actually maybe taken time to look at it a little more closely at that time, we wouldn't have maybe proposed that. But, yeah, they were really remarkable. I think they let a lot of people see the ways in which we were constructing arguments. A lot of the students at Austin and in other places, a lot of our colleagues, they were distributed to all of the epigraphers in the field, and iconographers, and they

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really were an interesting body of information, just for looking at Maya research at a particular point in time, and where ideas were carrying us.

Q: When these got out, there was some resistance to them by some of the archeologists in the field. There were errors in the identifications of stela and figures and things like that, because of some of the haste. And also I think there was the issue of an archeologist finding something and he wants to wait and publish it and he was getting a little upset that these things are getting published the next morning in a Copán note. And Bill Fash talked to us about this, about he had to kind of mediate this, having people on the staff coming up to him and asking about this, the difference of these ideas about how information should be treated.

David Stuart: Right, right. The idea behind the Copán Notes, which really started as glyph ideas, between me and Linda, in the first few issues, that changed fairly quickly into all sorts of ideas about Copán, including archeological information. So it ran up against the interests of other people working with Linda at Copán, and sometimes there was some controversy about this, because I know Linda would get very excited by the discovery of a jade cache, for example, in a temple, and let's write a Copán note. That would be kind of the mantra of that summer. It was, let's write a Copán note about this or that. And I think a number of people, myself included, but a number of other archeologists who were not used to this kind of outlet of information, they were a little wary, maybe a lot wary, of the idea of information being just put out really quickly without the proper kind of scientific consideration of evidence and wanting to put things out maybe in a more professional way. So there was this issue that came up pretty frequently with the Copán Notes, which was that they were done too quickly and maybe overstepping some of these boundaries of control of information, and scholarly methods of publication and so forth.

Q: There's an issue that goes on, it's going to be an eternal issue, as things approach the present, two things which seem suddenly contradictory. One is that people these days are being a lot more careful about attribution when they publish something. But also the other thing I'm hearing is that there is this community on the internet where ideas, you know, you may get 12 back and forth serves in the course of an afternoon, ideas kind of zipping around the world. And I imagine over time that they may make attribution very hard to even figure out...

David Stuart: Well, yes and no, because the flip side of that is in some ways the opposite. But yeah, with the Copán Notes, because some of them were pretty slapdash, sometimes the attribution of somebody's effort got put by the wayside. And some people were bothered by that. Names weren't mentioned sometimes, or things were cited

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properly and part of that was being in Copán, we didn't have the libraries that we needed for these things. And that's why I wanted to kind of wait and put stuff out until they could actually be considered in more detail. And it was hard to sometimes control the attribution of ideas.

Linda was – I think she describe herself once as someone who had the big picture and just wanted to get these ideas out. She was the representative of Maya studies to the public. She even kind of saw herself as the Carl Sagan of Maya studies, and she said that to me once. So she was happy to absorb ideas and present them. And a lot of times she was very careful about saying who had what idea, but a lot of times, the popular things she wrote sometimes, people felt like they weren't always credited properly. So it was just a part of her style, and her enthusiasm, to get ideas out that created that. That was really what was behind it. It was Linda's enthusiasm, get the ideas out.

The excitement of those times were such that it was hard for us to control our own information. We couldn't keep up with the ideas that we were having ourselves. It was kind of a strange disconnect there, in our bodies. Decipherments were being made, and we had to consider them all the time, and think about the implications. It's kind of interesting, too. This was before email, before the Internet, right before any of that. And nowadays when ideas are considered and notes are written, they tend to be emails. There aren't any Copán Notes anymore, really, published, in the sense of, like, "let's get it out today, let's get out an idea", because with the click of a button on your computer, you can distribute to as many people as you want an observation about a glyph reading. And then you get feedback from people, and so a typical day for me opening my emails is to see four or five back and forths between people. I might be just on the sidelines reading them, but an idea about a reading, and reaction: "oh, yeah, well, that's great. There's also this evidence for it", or "no, you're full of it. This isn't true". And so you read this back-and-forth and that's really valuable, because in some ways you can trace ideas in ways you couldn't before. You can trace who had the initial thought of this, or who observed this. So everyone I know who's in this field, we're saving those emails, because those are the emails that will be great to have on a library shelf 50, a 100 years from now, to see, really, how people think. It's the sort of thing you never see in a Copán Note. You don't see it in a published paper. But just this ebb and flow of ideas and the community of people that work on this stuff nowadays.

Q: That's great. After Copán, in the summer of 1986, there was this Guatemala symposium in epigraphy, and that's where you presented the *lu-bat* reading.

David Stuart: And the whole P.S.S. was that paper, too. Yeah.

Q: You talked about that series of symposiums, and those ideas about sculptures and sculptor signatures, and then about meeting Steve there.

David Stuart: That remarkable summer of 1986, towards the end of it, I traveled to Guatemala City for a symposium about Maya glyphs. It was the First Symposium on Maya Epigraphy. That was the name of the conference, held in Guatemala City in the National Museum, and Steve Houston was there, and I gave a paper which I worked on while I was at Copán. It was very hard to put together the handouts and the Xeroxes when I was at Copán, and take them to Guatemala City, but I somehow managed. And my paper was about the previous two years work, more or less, on the Primary Standard Sequence on these pottery texts, and showing its internal structure, the basic outline of what we had. And this is what other people later on kind of took and expanded upon.

And what I decided to kind of expand upon in my presentation was this bat glyph, this *lu-bat* glyph, which I proposed and meant something like “to carve.” And I had noticed that summer that there was some evidence from Copán, and also from some other places, that that’s exactly what this glyph had to mean. I didn’t have a phonetic reading for it, but I knew “carve” had to be more or less the meaning of it. And then looking at examples of this “carve” glyph, with what looked like sculptors’ signatures, on monuments from other sites: Piedras Negras, and El Peru and other places. And so I proposed a lot of ideas in this paper. It was an amalgam of things. This is what the dedicatory text on pottery looks like, and this is how it’s structured. One of those glyphs means “to carve” and it is also used for identifying the signatures of carvers of Maya monuments, the artists behind them.

And so that was, in a nutshell, what I presented. And that eventually grew into stuff I would later write, even my undergraduate thesis was about some of this stuff. So it was a really important paper. In fact, looking back it’s probably one of the most important papers I ever gave in any conference.

Q: What do you think is going on with something like Piedras Negras Stela 14? Half a dozen sculptors signed that same monument. Is this something that’s sort of unusual? There’s a particular period of time and a particular geographical area where this happens?

David Stuart: Right. Right.

Q: Has there been speculation about what was going on? There’s been supposition about the role of Maya painters and writers. Is there a whole other set of considerations about who were the Maya sculptors and how were they working?

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David Stuart: Looking at the signatures on Maya monuments, sometimes you'll see one or two carvers' names. But there a few monuments that have like 12 or even more names: "the carving of so and so", "the carving of so and so". That's a strange thing for us to consider. We're used to great sculptors signing their works, perhaps, but Michelangelo was one man. And what's this idea of maybe 10 or 12 people carving a monument, not necessarily even a big monument?

I think the explanation lies in looking at the way the Maya produced royal art. It wasn't necessarily always an individual effort. These were nobles. These were literate people. They were member of the court, and the production of these monuments was probably part of the service industry of those courts, in a sense. I can imagine that there were nobles who were vying for the chance to carve a small portion of a royal stela, as part of their, in a sense, their tribute to the king, their service for the king, what the Maya called *patan*. I think that's really the only way we can explain why there's so many names of nobles on these monuments, that they were kind of falling over each other almost to contribute to the carving of these monuments.

Q: Is there a possibility that they're something else, that they're donors rather than actual carvers?

David Stuart: I think there's no doubt that these are the actual signatures of carvers, because if you look at lot of examples on one monument, you'll see that they're very different looking. They're in different handwriting. There are different hands behind each one. And you can trace the same name onto different monuments. And lo and behold, it's the same style in each example of the same name. So it's, I think, one person in those cases, going around and contributing to this group effort of producing these great art works. There may have been one or two people behind the design of them, overall. There had to have been. But the production of them, the industry of producing these monuments, was something that involved far more people sometimes.

Q: Staying with that symposium, one of the first times you had a chance to spend some time with Steve Houston, you guys went out to a meal and had a discussion about Maya toponyms. You have to define toponym if you use that word, a place name. Place names might be good enough to use. And talk about where that came from, and where it went.

David Stuart: At the Guatemala symposium, Steve Houston came down to give a talk as well. And Steve and I had become pretty close friends by that point. We had corresponded a lot about glyph readings and so I remember one evening at the symposium, we went out to dinner together and I was telling him about a lot of this new stuff coming out of Copán. I mean, there's a lot to tell from that summer.

And I think I was talking to Steve about the mountain glyph, you know, the Macaw Mountain place name that is referred to at Copán, and the fact that there were place names in Maya inscriptions that were different from emblem glyphs, and Steve said, “well, yeah. I’ve been seeing a similar pattern at these sites over here”. There were some sites where he was working on with his dissertation, around Dos Pilas and Aguateca. By the end of that evening, I think we had kind of sketched on a couple of napkins a list of what we thought were viable place names in Maya texts for real places. Palenque had a place name that was not its emblem glyph, a few other sites, too. And so that was pretty exciting. That was one of the things from that time period that, again, looking back I’m kind of very proud of, was the contribution of *Classic Maya Place Names*. It was a book that Steve and I did together, published a few years later after we had compiled all the information.

Changing views in the late 1980s of Maya political and military history

David Stuart: One theme that really came into peoples’ minds in the 1980s, along with bloodletting and some of the ritual stuff, was warfare. It had been clear for quite a while to many people that this was an important topic that Maya inscriptions discussed from time to time, especially at certain sites, like Yaxchilan and Dos Pilas. And really what happened was, Steve Houston was working with the Dos Pilas material, and there was also some new understandings of some of the event glyphs that were going on. We knew about capturing, “so and so captured so and so”. There were other kinds of events, too, that we had come to understand. One of them is *ch’ak*, which means to chop, but also means to conquer, one side conquering another. Another one was *puluy*, to burn. Or some inscriptions said that “the shield and the spear of the enemy went down”. *Hubuy* is the word they used.

We really got a sense of the language behind Maya warfare very quickly, by the end of the 1980s. And a lot of people contributed to that new understanding, and some archeological projects also really started to get interested in this. Steve Houston had been working at Dos Pilas mapping these amazing fortifications there, and he started collaborating with Arthur Demarest at Vanderbilt, where I ended up going to graduate school.

By the time I did get to grad school, there was a project at Dos Pilas run by Vanderbilt University. And Arthur and Steve were co-directors. And new inscriptions were being found there while I was doing my own excavations, and one of the most important was this hieroglyphic stairway that had records of the Dos Pilas kings and their battles with

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neighboring sites. Sometimes their defeats were actually recorded, as well. And most important about that inscription was the way it talked about Dos Pilas' relationship to this great site of Calakmul, which is one of the oldest and largest of Maya kingdoms. Dos Pilas, by comparison, is a small, little site, and a newcomer on the scene. So they were making their own ties to Calakmul, and it really showed us that there were these networks of relationships, alliances between kingdoms large and small. And that there were well-defined groups that were really at each other's throat throughout most of the classic period, battling each other and causing havoc on the landscape just from what we could read.

Q: In the stairway at Dos Pilas, doesn't it specifically use the *yahau* expression? If you could talk about that and specifically what that expression means.

David Stuart: O.K. One of the really fascinating aspects of that stairway inscription at Dos Pilas was a mention of the king of Dos Pilas, himself, being the vassal, the *yahau*, of the King of Calakmul, this much larger place to the north. Calakmul clearly was pulling the strings on a lot of these smaller centers in the central Maya lowlands. And Dos Pilas was one of them. And we got another indication of this connection, also, with the discovery of this beautiful but badly broken wall panel that showed a bloodletting ritual by a royal Maya child, by a Maya prince. And standing to the side was someone called the guardian of the child, that was his official title. And he's someone from Calakmul, so the guardian of the prince of Dos Pilas is from this major center. It clearly shows that Calakmul had very close hands on Dos Pilas, and the internal politics of Dos Pilas.

Q: We talked a little bit about the picture that begins to emerge. It's getting clearer, even as we speak, what's the shape of Maya political history that begins to come out of this. It's really different than, you know, in the '70s everybody thought –

David Stuart: Right.

Q: Peter Mathews thought that everybody sort of had the same power. And Joyce Marcus had proposed that maybe there were quadripartite division. Then there gets to be this kind of superpower structure, that sort of degenerates into a melee by the end. And also – where does it come from? Where did Tikal and Calakmul come from? How were they different from what's come before? I talked to David Freidel about this. He had this answer, you start off with places like Cerros, and then something really changes when these big places emerge. What's going on? Stepping for a bird's eye view. What's the story as Maya political history begins to emerge, the way one could describe the history of the Roman Empire in a few dozen sentences, moving from the Republic up to being an empire and then it goes. What happens in Maya political history?

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David Stuart: O.K. People have been talking for a long time about how Maya politics were organized. And in the 1970s and '80s, the prevailing opinion was that really we had a lot of different, individual kingdoms on the landscape. There were small ones and large ones, but none really seemed to dominate any others. There was no evidence to suggest that there was really an elaborate hierarchy among all of these different political units, these kingdoms.

That really started to change. I mean, one of the big changes in my own thinking about this came with the discovery of the Dos Pilas staircase, where they couldn't be more explicit about Dos Pilas being a vassal of the King of Calakmul. And Calakmul being such a large site, it had to have been more economically and politically powerful than Dos Pilas. There's just no question about it. So we moved from this scenario of a lot of competing kingdoms on the landscape to one of, maybe a few being extremely important and this had been suggested actually a long time before by Joyce Marcus, that there were actually four reigning kingdoms with a bunch of smaller ones around it. I and others were never very comfortable with that, because we just didn't see the internal evidence for it.

But what came out of that thinking was that, yes, there *are* more powerful kingdoms and there ended up being really two that were seemingly competing with one another throughout most of the history of the classic period, that's Calakmul on one side, and Tikal on the other. And they were really at the hub of two sets of spokes, of alliances and connections. And there was a lot of warfare between these two places, and their subordinates.

How did this happen in Maya history? I think there has to be sort of an economic reason why Calakmul and Tikal ended up being so important. But there was also an ideological one, that I don't think we really understand yet. We don't understand what it was about those places that really allowed them to grow at the rate that they did. Tikal, early on, in the pre-classic, was not one of the great Maya cities. There were bigger places around 200, 100 B.C. But there was a change in the first centuries A.D. Tikal takes off, and becomes a place that everyone pays attention to. Calakmul, likewise, probably goes through a similar process, and might even be older than Tikal. But until we really can excavate more, say, of Calakmul – and that's happening right now – until we have that evidence, it's going to be really hard to know what those social and political and religious transformations were.

Q: About 1989, I think, the *u kab hi* agency expression. Just to know that came about...

David Stuart: Well, for many years there was a glyph that many people noticed was really common in the inscriptions, that seemed to express a hierarchical relationship between an historical event and a figure who would seem to have power over that event, that they're calling the shots over the thing that's going on. I remember Linda called that an "agency glyph", the agent of the action, the person who really is responsible for it. His or her name comes after this glyph, and it's a glyph that represents the sign for earth, the word for which is *kab* in Mayan languages.

So we knew phonetically more or less what it should be. Something like *U kab hi*, or some people suggested *u kahi*. And it wasn't really until 1994, 1995 that the best explanation for this came up. And this was when Steve Houston was visiting my house in Massachusetts one day, and we were going through dictionaries and thinking about ideas, and we both focused on this word in Tzotzil which is the word for earth, *kab*, but in Tzotzil they say, *chab*, as a verb, which is – we knew this had to be some sort of verb, probably – *chabi* means to oversee. It means, like you're overseeing a *milpa*, a corn field. It means to take care of animals, or to herd animals. And it comes from the word "earth", in the sense that a cornfield is in the earth. When you "earth" a cornfield, you're tending to it.

So I had no doubt that this is really the basis for the glyph, and what they're saying is that when a King of Calakmul is overseeing the installation of a junior lord, then in a sense they're saying that he's overseeing it, in the same way that a farmer tends to his *milpa*. So there's this agricultural metaphor for these political relationships. It's really wonderful, and very Maya.

The decipherment of various specific glyphs that have provided a "window" into ancient Maya thought and belief

Q: The "way" expression. Could you tell a little bit about how that was arrived at. What it means.

David Stuart: Right. When I was a graduate student at Vanderbilt, and this was the same time as our field project down at Dos Pilas that I was part of, I was living in Nashville and Steve was one of my professors, basically, even though we had this long relationship as colleagues on Maya glyphs. I was the graduate student, and Steve was teaching classes. And so I was in his office quite a bit and – I think it was his idea, really, from the beginning. He said, well, Dave, I think there's this glyph that reads "way". It has a "wa" sign and a "ya" sign and those are the phonetic markers that really

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tell me that's it probably pronounced "way". I don't think he had really thought about the implications of this. He just kind of blurted it out one day when we were talking. So we started looking through the dictionaries, and it meant "wizard". It meant to transform. It meant, in some languages, the animal spirit within a person. They used this idea of animal co-essence.

And this was a different kind of thing from what we were used to reading about in Maya glyphs. They weren't talking about monuments. They weren't talking about warfare. They were talking about, kind of, the *inner souls* of people. And so it took us little while to wrap our heads around it, but these glyphs, these "way" glyphs, were appearing on pottery, in captions, with scenes of these fantastic animals and creatures and sort of spooky looking, walking skeletons and that kind of thing, and jaguars and snakes and deer. So this idea of the animal soul of human beings, which a lot of anthropologists had been studying in Mesomerica, that seemed to be on the right track for explaining these images, that maybe they are the animal co-essences of human beings.

So we wrote that up, and it turned out at the same time Nikolai Grube was coming at the very same reading based on a different set of evidence. It was one of these times that just seemed right for the decipherment of that glyph. And so the three of us kind of working independently, me and Steve on one side, and Nikolai on the other, came up with this reading. And it really did change our thinking about Maya religion in a lot of ways.

Q: Another glyph, the *tz'ak* glyph, the fish image glyph. Could you talk about your experience with that?

David Stuart: Yeah. There's a glyph that shows up in several inscriptions from Yaxchilan and other sites. It's very recognizable. It shows a human hand holding a fish. And Tatiana Proskouriakoff wrote about it as a glyph having something to do with sacrifice, something to do with bloodletting. Way back in the '60s and '70s, she was thinking along those lines. And we called it the fish-in-hand glyph. She called it that originally. And we didn't have a good understanding of it until the phonetic clues made themselves apparent. I found a substitution where the fish-in-hand was replaced by two syllables. One of them was "*tz'a*", and one of them was "*ka*." So that made the pretty straightforward suggestion that "*tz'ak*" is the word to look up, to see if "fish in hand" could be explained.

The word "*tz'ak*" when I looked it up in the dictionary, in different languages it has different meanings, but they're actually really interesting, because *tz'ak* in Yucatec Mayan in the colonial period, right after the conquest, one person says that it means to conjure clouds or to conjure something out of nothing. So there's this ritual meaning for

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tz'ak that actually has a lot to do with, I think, bloodletting and this ritual of manifesting gods in ancient times.

But what is it about a fish in the hand, I mean, why is that *tz'ak*? A few years later, I was looking at a publication about one Mayan language in Chiapas called Tzotzil, very important language for the decipherment of Maya glyphs. And the word "*tz'ak*" in that language, believe it or not, refers to the times that you can reach into the water and grab a fish with your bare hand, which is something that fishermen occasionally do, I suppose. But it's this idea of grabbing something that's elusive, reaching into another realm, in a way, in another area of the world, or even into the underworld, and wrenching something out of that and bringing it into your own world. That is conjuring. That's conjuring the spirit. So in a way, these two very different meanings are describing the same thing. One is mundane, what a fisherman does. And one gets to the most esoteric ideas about Mayan religion.

Q: Great. Wonderful. Another word, is it *u bah* the one that refers to "the image of"... Could you talk about that and what that told us about all these images that we're looking at?

David Stuart: Yeah, yeah, sure. One of the most important and common glyphs that we find in the inscriptions is the head of a gopher, a gopher's head, with the "*u*" sign in front of it. And we've known for a long time that the reading of this is probably "*u bah*." "*Bah*" is the word for gopher, but it also has some other interesting meanings. It means the person, one's body, one's self. And the reason that this glyph is important is because Proskouriakoff, back in the '60s, recognized, even though she couldn't read it, and she didn't know it was a gopher, she said, well, this glyph is really interesting because it always goes on captions, name captions in scenery, you know, when they're labeling people, this is so and so, and this is so and so. Proskouriakoff noticed that this animal head always comes first, it always comes before the name, and so she reasoned, before she could ever read it, that this has to be something like "here is the portrait of", or "here is so and so". And she published this in a article, and when we knew the phonetics of it, "*u bah*", really all that means is "this is the image of", "this is the body of" so and so. Image, body, self, all of these ideas are kind of wrapped up in this word "*bah*" and it's a good example of Maya rebus writing, using the head of a gopher for something that's kind of abstract, this idea of the self, of the person. But the function of it is exactly what Proskouriakoff said it was. And it was a really nice confirmation using very precise phonetic elements, and a phonetic argument, and confirming exactly what Proskouriakoff had to say.

Q: *Ch'en*, the cave glyph.

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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David Stuart: *Ch'en*, yeah. One evening when I was returning home from a long day at the Peabody Museum, back in Cambridge, I was riding a bus back to Marblehead where I lived, and I was thinking about looking at a couple of inscriptions or something, that were in a book, and I wasn't really intending to make a discovery on the bus that night. But everything kind of clicked for me, and I thought, gee whiz, this glyph I'm looking at probably means something like cave, because it represents an interesting thing. It's half darkened. Half of it is always kind of darkened space, and you see jawbones. You see skulls. You see crossed bones, these things that are involved with death and the underworld. It was a locational glyph. We knew it had to refer to a kind of place, although we didn't know what. It's half darkened, I mean there's sort of this cross-hatching that shows it's a dark place. There are bones and you see disarticulated eyeballs. You see really a death-oriented imagery inside this sign. Occasionally you find on it, also, a syllable, "na", that indicates that whatever word this thing is, it's got to end in the sound "en" or the letter "n."

So I remember riding the bus home one evening from work at Harvard. All of these elements sort of clicked into place and I thought, well, gee whiz, if we're talking about a dark interior space that's ritually important, that ends in the sound "en" or the letter "n", a really good candidate would be the word "*ch'en*", which is in all Mayan languages in one form or another, meaning cave. Caves are some of the most important places in Maya religion even today, so you would expect the word to appear somewhere in Maya inscriptions.

Now, this was one of these working ideas, very hard to confirm. There was no direct substitution with the syllables the way that "*witz*" presented itself, and that kind of thing. So it was an interesting idea and nothing more. And what really made me think I was on the right track was seeing an inscription from a cave in Chiapas, that had been painted on the walls of this cave back in the – oh, probably around 500 A.D., 450. And the opening sentence of this inscription said, on such and such a day, "*huli tu Ch'en*", if I was right about that glyph being cave, "He arrived into the cave." *Tu ch'en*. And I thought, wow. Well, there you go. I mean, he's just recording, whoever wrote this is recording his pilgrimage probably to this ritual cave. And that was really what nailed it for me.

Q: Great. And that's good. Moving up closer to the present, in the late '90s, Linda was diagnosed with cancer. And you began to get back in closer communication with her. And I think you described to me, you had some conversations about things, and then you came to visit her, and you said it was sort of like a rock band getting back together. You had this really great, good time together. Could you talk a little bit about what that was like?

David Stuart: Yeah. When I heard that Linda was diagnosed with cancer, I think that year leading up to her death, I came out to Austin twice, and it was in some ways obviously a painful time, but in other ways it was a wonderful time, because there was a lot of history that we had had together and later on in our relationship, of course, there was some tension between us and I had kind of broken off and done my own thing for many years. We still kept in touch a lot, but it wasn't like it had been when I was in my teen years.

So when I got together with her, I remember, in her house here in Austin, it may have been the last time I saw her, I don't quite remember, but we agreed to write a paper together, and we had been corresponding a little bit leading up to that about some inscriptions at Copán that were really interesting. And so I remember we stayed up late one night talking about this glyph and that glyph, and looking up words in the dictionaries, and we were looking up examples of stuff. And it was a lot like it had been, back in the early '80s, in '84, '85.

And looking back on it, there was that time in between where we had our different lives, in a way, apart from each other, but it was sort of like a reunion when we finally get back together. It was like a rock band getting back to put out a new single or something, after many years, and it was great. I really – I felt like we tied up a lot of loose ends with those last times together.

Q: What do you think that Linda gave you?

David Stuart: I think Linda gave me a sense of what was possible. She gave this to a lot of people, to a lot of her students, and even people who weren't formally her students. She opened up the possibilities for a 12-year-old kid, who was interested in Maya glyphs, but nothing more. I mean, I was never ambitious to become an archeologist. It's something I wanted to do, but it's not like I had this career design. I just loved the Maya because it was fun. Maya glyphs were so much fun, and they were fun to Linda. And what she really gave me, I think, was she gave me a vision of what working with Maya culture could be, the self-fulfillment, the way it affected other people. I mean, it was through Linda that I saw how many people could be affected by looking at these remarkable inscriptions and reading about the religion and the culture, the people who had come to Austin. It was through Linda that I saw that enthusiasm, and I saw her own enthusiasm bring in all of the folks. If I had not met Linda, I probably wouldn't have seen that potential of kind of communicating the greatness of that civilization to a wider audience, or even appreciating the civilization itself and the culture, even as it exists today.

Q: What do you think she gave to the field as a whole. You said that she was, in a way, kind of like a bulldozer. She was charging out and creating new roads. Some things got knocked over, and some people got their toes rolled over in the process, but she was opening up new paths. What kind of paths would those be? What did she leave the field with that wasn't there before?

David Stuart: Well, I think, almost from the very moment that Linda entered Maya studies, and I didn't know her in those first few years, but I sensed it from the people who I did know, and could see it as a young child even. Here was this person who was making everyone just so excited. Linda, she plowed through the morass of Maya academia and she cleared out all of this area where people hadn't been communicating with each other. There had been petty arguments among academics and so forth, and Linda cross-cut all of that. She cross-cut generations with her collaborations with Floyd Lounsbury and Peter Mathews. She brought so many diverse people together, and through her charisma and through her vision of what was possible, I think she made everything *relevant*. It wasn't just a dusty, academic topic. She really made an appreciation of Maya culture and of Mesoamerica in general, and even ancient art, she brought it into the real world of today and made people see its relevance.

The recent shift from paraphrase to precise translation of ancient Maya texts

Q: Thank you. 1999 was the year of the Austin meeting when the Cholti hypothesis was presented. Could you talk a little bit about the impact of that. Where we stand today in looking at the language of the decipherment, and transition from what had been very powerful in the '70s and '80s, that process of paraphrase, into actually recording the precise language of Maya writing.

David Stuart: In 1999, I came to Austin, along with Steve Houston, and John Robertson, who is a linguist at Brigham Young University. And the three of us together presented, over a two-day period, kind of our vision of the language of Maya glyphs. And it was an interesting time to do that, because I think a lot of people had come to realize that if you were going to read Maya inscriptions, you had to basically be completely fluent in the language itself.

I mean, these were texts that were fully phonetic. They were writing a *language*, and it was pretty much one language across the board, we proposed. And so you really had to know a lot of nuts and bolts about the verbs and the tenses and a lot of categories that,

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frankly, Maya epigraphy was not comfortable with. I mean, Maya epigraphy had, in the '70s and '80s, a lot of it had been broad structural analysis, very visual analysis, not so much linguistically focused. And now we were dealing with first person pronouns, second person pronouns, completive verbs, incompletive verbs, anti-passive verbs, medio-passive verbs, I mean, all these words were flying at people, and I didn't really know what they meant, either! I was trying to teach myself a lot of this linguistics, because that's what we had to do. We found ourselves in a field that was transformed, having to be linguists as much as we were archeologists, or as much as we were ethnographers.

Q: Talk about some of these unfamiliar terms that you explained.

David Stuart: Yeah. By the late 1990s, I think Maya glyph studies found itself at a time where you had to really know Mayan languages in a way as never before. We were dealing with verbs and linguistic categories that frankly had not really come up before. We had first person pronouns, second person pronouns, third person pronouns. We had different verbs that we had to trace historically. There were passive verbs and transitive verbs and anti-passives and medio-passives, and these were technical terms that I didn't know much about. I had to teach myself a lot of this, and I'm still teaching myself a lot of it, frankly.

And so in 1999, Steve and John Robertson and I presented kind of our overall view of what Mayan, the Mayan language of the inscriptions looked like, placing it in the context of the history of Mayan languages. Some of it was definitely controversial. We proposed that there was a particular language that was recorded at Palenque, Copán, Tikal, and that it was sort of a courtly language, probably not spoken by many people in the broader population, but an elite language of the courts, a formal language, most closely related probably to modern Choltil Maya.

Now, you know, in the Austin meetings, in particular, it was kind of jarring to present a lot of this detail because for a good 20 years leading up to that point, Linda and others had kind of loosely paraphrased a lot of text, especially in the '70s and '80s, we didn't know a lot of the words. We didn't know a lot of the verb tenses. We knew more or less what a text might be saying. Oh, this is a name.... this is a birth glyph.... this is a name... this is accession to power. But by the late '90s, we really did know our stuff. We could transcribe glyphs phoneme by phoneme, just all the way across, and there were very few gaps in our knowledge, frankly. So we decided it was time to present all of this detail.

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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There was some resistance to it, I should say. Sure, there were some academic debates about what we were saying. Well, maybe it's not quite what we were saying. Maybe it's another language [other than Cholti] or something. Well, fine. But there was also, I think, a realization by a lot of people which is hey, you know, Maya glyph studies is not what it once was. The people who work on this material are getting into a level of analysis as never before. It's not necessarily open to a lot of people to study directly. It takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of study, as a graduate student or as a professional, to know some of this stuff. And I'm still learning a lot of the things that one needs to know to read Maya glyphs. No one person can control all of that data.

So we presented all of this, and I think it was a surprise for a lot of people. In the wake of that, in the years since we presented at Austin, there's been a lot of debate, a very healthy debate, about the nature of the language of the glyphs. But I'm really happy to see that a lot of the younger epigraphers – because now I'm an old fogey in this field, right? There are a lot of new scholars from all over the world. They are dealing with exactly the same issues and questions that John and Steve and I proposed, changing some things for sure, but dealing with it in the same level that we wanted to see it dealt with. And that's really heartening, because I think that's where we are right now, and will be.

Q: Let's talk about the sort of new generation that will take over, what they are doing and what they need to be doing.

David Stuart: Uh huh. A lot of the younger generation of epigraphers who have come up since I started, especially in the last 10 years or so, have absorbed virtually everything that we were doing before, in those years, and I guess it's a good sign of the maturity of the discipline, but I find that there is a lot of specialization going on. There are those who really study the linguistic issues presented by Maya texts, the verb systems and how they relate to the history of Mayan languages. There are others who are really more interested in more of the historical aspect, recording wars between kingdoms and when this person took office and when this person died, kind of reconstructing the chronicles. So there are different kinds of Maya epigraphy nowadays, whereas back in the '80s and before then if you were studying Maya glyphs you studied everything, right. No one nowadays has control over all of that information. No one can have adequate knowledge of historical linguistics, of the epigraphy of the system itself and the way it operates, of the archeology and the literature of the archeology, where these objects and monuments are found, and of the culture, the ethnography of the Maya. These are all big sub-disciplines or disciplines unto themselves. So to be studying Maya glyphs, really, you have to wear so many hats, and so naturally there are specialties that have emerged. It's sad in a way that it isn't what it was before, but I think it reflects a healthy maturation

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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process. We really are dealing with the glyphs in a way that's so sophisticated that you need to be able to specialize and focus in that way.

Q: Why did the decipherment take so long? Egyptian was pretty much cracked by one man 20 years after the discovery of the Rosetta Stone. Is it because this is the most complicated writing system in the world, or because everybody had cultural blinders, or didn't realize the kind of tools they needed as scientists, that they couldn't tackle it with just their general knowledge as archeologists? What do you think it was?

David Stuart: Yeah. In some ways it really is hard to explain why it took so long to break the Maya code, but in some ways it's also easy to explain, or at least partially easy to explain. I think one of the reasons is that Maya glyphs, unlike Egyptian and unlike some other writing systems that we call hieroglyphic, it's visually so much more complex than those other systems. It's that inbuilt variability or that basic inbuilt system where a scribe could pick and choose among a repertoire of signs to spell a word. It wasn't a set, established way of spelling. There were rules for putting signs together, but there were so many forms that a scribe could use to spell those words within that system of rules. So it's definitely a true system. but it took so long to figure that out, and it was really getting through this morass of the tangled visuals of the script to reveal the underpinnings, that structural system underneath, and that's what took so long, and that couldn't happen until we had enough examples to work with.

So probably one of the most important inventions that's responsible for the decipherment is the Xerox machine, the photocopier. In the 1960s and '70s, scholars could copy drawings and send them to each other. Ian Graham and his incredible database of drawings, of field drawings and photographs, those were distributed to a lot of people working in the field. That was the raw material we had to work with. It's no coincidence that that happened right before all of these advances in the '70s and '80s. There's a direct cause and effect there. A lot of things came together, but it was really that availability of a large numbers of inscriptions, working out that inner system using Knorosov as a basis and observations made by Thompson and others, combining a lot of the work of earlier scholars, and adding that into the mix. It really all sorted itself out by the 1980s, and we've been dealing with the implications of that ever since.

The importance of the Maya Corpus Project and Justin Kerr's rollouts of Maya vases

Q: You mentioned Ian's drawings. Two major databases came into play in the '70s and '80s and one of them you were directly involved in and working with Ian. Talk a minute about Ian's Corpus Project and some of your experiences with that and its importance.

David Stuart: The Corpus Project up at Harvard is really the lifeblood of Maya epigraphy. Ian Graham, who came into archeology fairly late in life as this remarkable, intrepid explorer, found countless Maya sites, very famous Maya sites nowadays, that he basically was the first person to visit, El Mirador and Aguateca and places like that, and in the course of those years recording and making drawings, very beautiful drawings of Maya texts, compiling them in the archive up at the Peabody Museum, allowing people to come in and photocopy them and so forth. I think Ian can be credited with being one of the most important figures in the history of the decipherment, not that he was working on the decipherment itself – he's so self-effacing, he would never say that he was an epigrapher – but as the compiler of the raw material, of the raw data, it's hard to think of anyone more important than the person who collects the data and collects it well and publishes it well.

So Ian is really the hero to a lot of us, and I was honored and thrilled to work with Ian for many years up at Harvard on the Corpus Project doing the field work, going down into pretty remote places and photographing and drawing texts. It's the work that I still do in fact in helping to expand that database, but it was Ian's work, and especially in the '70s, when you look at the timing of it, it's so important – Ian publishes the first Corpus volumes in the mid '70s, right when the first Mesa Redonda is, and a bunch of volumes come out in the late '70s, Yaxchilan and Naranjo, and all of a sudden you have well-published sites, and Ian's field drawings being distributed, and it's no accident that we have that material and then in the 1980s we really have the golden age of Maya decipherment. I see a cause and effect of making available all of that material and really being able to work with it, Dos Pilas, and inscriptions from more remote sites in Guatemala and Mexico, Toniná for example. This is really what we needed in order to make the decipherments, and it was really Ian who, I think, almost single-handedly transformed Maya studies by doing what he did.

Q: The other big body of material that came in was the vases, Justin's rollouts. That opened up a whole other world of Maya texts, I think the largest body of texts, and, beyond the PSS, one of the most unknown. I was going to ask you what you think are the frontiers that are remaining to be explored. I think that's one of them.

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

Transcript of filmed interview

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David Stuart: Yeah. The other hero I think in the story who maybe doesn't get enough credit in the history of the decipherment is Justin Kerr, who, like Ian Graham, was a professional photographer by training. They both had very similar backgrounds, in fact. Whereas Ian was recording monuments in the field, Justin was recording Maya vases in New York City and in museums around the world and, most importantly of all, making those images available to people. His fabulous roll-outs have left their mark on Maya studies. Any student anywhere in the world now can go to the database that's online on the Internet and look at Justin's photographs and start doing those analyses, the same kinds of work with the Primary Standard Sequence that I was doing back 20 years ago. Anyone can do that now using Justin's database, and students are so aware of Justin and his contribution because it's so accessible and it's really just so remarkable.

There's a lot of stuff there too in Justin's imagery, these roll-outs showing scenes of Maya gods and mythology and these *way* characters, these fantastic spooks of Maya folk tales. There's so much there still to study. The real esoteric world of the Maya is kind of hidden in these vases, in these vase paintings, and as far as future work goes with Maya art and iconography and deciphering of glyphs, a lot of it's going to be there on the pottery, and that's really where a lot of the frontiers are, and the evidence is there for people to use now.

Q: Are there other things you want to say about what you feel is the future for Maya studies—

David Stuart: Yeah. Sure. I'll talk a little bit about it.

Q: --what people will be doing in 20 years or 50 years... Will they be refining the details, or – Mike Coe said someday somebody will go into a dry cave, and find a library of Maya books....

David Stuart: It's really tempting to see the future of Maya glyph studies as working out the details of what we already know, and it would be very easy to say that, but I think it's also kind of too easy. It's not true. I think all it takes is one discovery of something, I don't know what, somewhere in the field. It can be the discovery of some painted murals in a pyramid in Guatemala, it could be the discovery of a Maya codex, a manuscript that has glyphs in a dry cave, it could be a group of 30 ritually deposited stelae at El Mirador or Tikal. Archeologists in the future are going to find stunning things, that's a given, in the next 20, 30, 40 years. To think that we now have an adequate picture of the ancient Maya is just ludicrous. All it takes is one find to change everything. So yeah, there will be working out the details in what we now know, but

what we now know is probably miniscule compared to what we will know 50 or 100 years from now.

How recent discoveries at San Bartolo change our understanding of the origins of Maya writing

Q: Talk a bit about the origins of Maya writing. Where did these signs come from? It looks like Maya writing was full-blown and it's already a full writing system by the time we see it. Talk about that sort of in general, what we know up to now, and then maybe the second thing, address what San Bartolo is –

David Stuart: Yes. It's changing as of this week, yeah.

Q: Before we get to San Bartolo, talk in general about what we've come to over the past 10 or 20 years as to what the origin is. Is it portable objects, can we see evolution in the early script and where does it come from?

David Stuart: The early history of Maya writing is one of the big questions we have and when you start looking at that issue you have to look beyond the Maya, right. The Maya were part of this bigger cultural region that we call Mesoamerica and writing was a basic part of Mesoamerican culture whether you're talking about some of the earliest cities in the Valley of Oaxaca with the Zapotecs, or whether you're talking about some of the "later" quote, unquote, Olmec cultures just to the west of the Maya region.

Writing was pretty common in early Mesoamerica. So did the Maya simply borrow their script from these other cultures? We really don't know, but when we look at the first Maya glyphs that we have, usually on portable objects as it turns out, I think they're early examples of these name tags probably, early examples of these dedicatory texts, but they're full blown, they are fully evolved forms. It's not primitive writing by any sense, and we're looking at examples from about 100 A.D., let's say, and clearly if you look at these texts there's centuries of development behind that, but we just are not seeing it in the archeological record. So the question of who invented writing and where it came from, I think it would be silly to try to say "oh, it came from Oaxaca and evolved and spread eastward into the Maya region". We can't say that because A, it's really hard to date stones that have writing on them, and B, we just don't have the evidence. How much archeology has been done in the earliest Maya cities, in sites like El Mirador? Even in well-known sites like Tikal and Uaxactun, there is still so much early stuff to be worked on there.

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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Q: Talk about San Bartolo and how it's changing your image.

David Stuart: When I think of a discovery that can sort of automatically change the way we look at the Maya and the history of Maya culture, I like to think of this very recent discovery of pre classic wall paintings at a site called San Bartolo. It's a site that was found just a few years ago by my friend and colleague, William Saturno, in March of 2001 so not very long ago, but San Bartolo is already very famous and it will be probably even more famous. It has wall paintings dating to, probably the very latest about 50 B.C., and the stunning thing is that there are glyphs in the murals. They're painted hieroglyphs, beautiful calligraphy, again showing that the writing that they are using is centuries old. It must be centuries old in its development even by that point.

We don't even know how to read it in some ways. In other words, the script that they're writing at San Bartolo is Maya, but it's an older Maya. I'm not comfortable looking at it. I can see some things that are vaguely familiar, but it's maybe 300 years before the earliest texts we used to have. There's this huge gap there, and we can't connect the dots, and so it's almost as if we have a new script that we have to wrestle with – and how more exciting can that be? We have to go through a whole other sequence of decipherment! We have to go through another – hopefully not 100 years – before we can begin to understand exactly what they're writing in these earliest inscriptions. Now, the digs at San Bartolo are going on right now as we are filming this, and some exciting things are coming out of the ground that I know about, and a few other people know about, and a lot more people will know about in the coming years but they are the kinds of finds that are going to keep transforming Maya archeology and what we know about the development of Maya culture.

Q: Great. Thank you.