

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

FULL PROGRAM DESCRIPTION (865 words):

For a people to lose their history is a tragedy; to recover it, almost a miracle.

There are over six million Maya today. They have a rich and vibrant culture, and have guarded their traditions with great care. But for four centuries they have been a people cut off from the written record of their own extraordinary past.

For almost 2000 years, the ancient Maya of Central America recorded their history and ideas in an intricate and beautiful hieroglyphic script. Then, in the 16th century, Spanish invaders burned their books and ruthlessly extinguished hieroglyphic literacy. By the 18th century, when stone inscriptions were discovered buried in the jungles of Central America and bark-paper books began to surface in the libraries of Europe, no one on earth could read them.

Breaking the Maya Code is the story of the 200-year struggle to unlock the secrets of the hieroglyphs, arguably one of the most complex writing systems ever created. It is based in large part on the book of the same title by archaeologist and historian Michael Coe, himself intimately involved in the decipherment story and an on-screen presence in the film. His book has been called by the New York Times “one of the great stories of twentieth century scientific discovery”.

Breaking the Maya Code is a detective story filled with misunderstandings and false leads, rivalries and colliding personalities. It leads us from the jungles of Guatemala to the bitter cold of Russia, from ancient Maya temples to the dusty libraries of Dresden and Madrid.

Much of the drama of the film involves writing and reading, not normally thought of as the stuff of dramatic thrills. But director David Lebrun began the project with an image of an ancient Maya scribe and a modern researcher on opposite sides of the surface of a Maya text, one writing, the other attempting to read, each trying to break through the membrane

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of the text to make contact with the other. As author Mike Coe puts it, “You don’t have to put on a pith helmet and carry a machete to make great discoveries. Förstemann [one of the early decipherers] traveled in his mind, and managed to reach the mind of the Maya. To me, that’s the most exciting thing of all.”

The heroes of the story are an extraordinary and diverse group of men and women: linguists and mathematicians, artists and adventurers, archeologists and eccentrics – each finding a different piece of the puzzle. They include an English photographer, a German librarian, a Russian soldier, a California newspaperman, and an art teacher from Tennessee. An 18-year-old boy, immersed in the glyphs since early childhood, makes the final breakthrough.

Breaking the Maya Code was filmed at over 40 locations in nine countries. The style of the film allows the viewer to see through the decipherers’ eyes and follow their thinking. POV shooting, animation and digital highlighting guide the viewer through richly complex Maya images, just as the eye of a trained researcher will dart from glyph to glyph in a Maya text. The clues build up, and form into patterns. When a solution finally appears, the viewer experiences its compelling elegance and understands the wit and artistry of the ancient Maya scribes.

The decipherment has transformed our vision of the ancient Maya, not just once but several times over. To the invading Spanish, who both destroyed their writing and kept records that were invaluable to its eventual decipherment, Maya culture was fascinating but clearly the work of the devil. To the 19th and early 20th century scholars who unlocked their mathematics and astronomy, the Maya became a uniquely peaceful people, ruled by wise astronomer-priests. The Maya texts now coming into focus describe a surprisingly familiar world of warring city-states, dominated by two “superpowers” and their long struggle for domination. They recount a history of alliance and betrayal, of powerful rulers, brilliant generals, and subtle and sophisticated artist-scribes. But the texts also reveal a strange and unfamiliar world of kings and queens who regularly shed and burned their

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blood to invoke the Vision Serpent, a world whose narratives are shaped by an intricate cosmology that weaves together the lives of humans, the deeds of mythic heroes and the cycles of the planets and the stars.

By the turn of the 21st century more than 90% of the hieroglyphs could be read with confidence, and scholars were reconstructing the ancient Maya language in which they were written. As linguist Barbara Macleod puts it, “It’s like having a time machine to be able to read these texts. Maybe sometimes I’m the first person to actually say them out loud in more than a thousand years.”

By the end of the film the decipherment has come home, re-uniting the living Maya with their own lost history and opening up an invaluable treasure for all of us. The Maya rose to a high artistic culture in complete isolation from the web of influence that pervaded the civilizations of Europe and Asia. Their texts record almost 2000 years of history, myth and literature, a treasure unique in the New World. They have much to teach us all about what it means to be human.