

BARBARA MACLEOD

Interviewed March 8, 2005 at her home in Austin, Texas

Barbara MacLeod is a Maya linguist and epigrapher, caver and spelunker, stunt pilot and flight instructor. She has made numerous significant contributions to the Maya decipherment, in particular her work on the reading of the Primary Standard Sequence, a formulaic text found on the rims of hundreds of Maya vases, and her contributions to the understanding of the grammatical structure of the language of the hieroglyphic script.



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Interview transcript

How she was led from cave exploration to Maya studies

Q: How did you begin to get involved with the Maya area?

Barbara: It happened kind of through a back door, because I was very active in cave exploring when I grew up in Missouri, and I had my first opportunity to do some cave exploring in Belize in the summer of 1970. I was living in Seattle and some friends of mine who were active cavers had made contact with someone in Belize who had done a lot of caving, and invited us down.

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So several of us drove down in a Volkswagen bus for the whole summer of 1970 and spent three months exploring caves in Belize. I discovered they're full of Maya artifacts. Most of what we saw that summer was just potsherds, didn't really see any whole vessels that I recall. But it became obvious that the Maya were going way back into caves, and I was just fascinated with them as cave explorers, was really interested in their technology and in their ability to get that deep into the earth and in the things that I imagined they were leaving behind, even though I didn't really see any undisturbed sites that summer, as I did later on.

And then it just miraculously came together that I was able to get into the Peace Corp as a cave explorer, come back to Belize for 5 years, and my job was to explore caves for the archeology department. And so it just opened the door wide on the Maya as cave explorers and cave practitioners, of course that first summer I also visited Tikal and Palenque so that really fired me up about the Maya as well.

Q: And in the experiences you had in caves—I remember from our previous discussions you had some very profound experiences with them. From that point of view, what is your sense, and what sense have you arrived at since, of what role the caves had in Maya cosmology, how would they fit into their sense of the cosmos and their sense of the actual space they were living in, and what was your sense of how they were used?

Barbara: I think that they were repositories of sacrificial burials, that they took the bodies of sacrificed victims to caves to bury them, not truly bury them but just lay them out. I think in some cases they may have actually conducted sacrifice in caves. They were sites of auto-sacrifice. We found evidence for that all over the Belize caves, we find bone needles, obsidian blades and stingray spines that are all well documented in the iconography as blood letters. And we're finding them in really remote areas of caves, suggesting that they retreated to remote places and practiced bloodletting, maybe even in total darkness. I've done some experiments with total darkness, which proved to me that it's a very potent trigger for visionary experience. And so I think that's one of the things they were doing, I mean as a means of achieving trance states and communion with earth gods, and it may well have been part of an ancestor contact practice as well.

Q: Could you talk about your sense of the role caves have in Maya cosmology?

Barbara: Well I think that caves were a palpable opportunity to experience the underworld, or certain aspects of the underworld, I think that caves were seen as the abode of earth and rain deities, the Chacs lived in caves. I think the Maya went into caves to propitiate, make contact with earth and rain deities. I'm certain in some cases

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that they were performing rain making ceremonies in caves, because we have archeological evidence of what looks very much like a Chac ceremony in a cave in Belize where they constructed an altar table. Multiple times actually, because we found multiple post holes for several different tables.

I personally believe that they used the total darkness environment of caves to trigger trance states, and it was probably part of a bloodletting ritual, we have a lot of documentation from the images in Naj Tunich [cave] of bloodletting, and I've got lots of archeological evidence from caves in Belize of bloodletters and pretty much nothing else, just bloodletters being left in remote parts of caves, single bone needles or a few stingray spines.

The other thing I think they were doing was taking the bodies of sacrificial victims into caves and just leaving them, they didn't attempt to bury them, but they would put them underneath rocks or under ledges. And we would sometimes find pottery vessels that had been placed under dripping stalactites, in some cases the pots themselves had become completely filled to overflowing with calcite, so that there's a stalagmite growing on the pot. And it's well documented that they did go into caves and remote places in the forest to collect what they called virgin waters, *su hui ha* for use in rituals. So water collection, rain making, sacrificial burial, personal blood letting, communion with earth and rain deities.

Q: In terms of when we talked not long ago about cities built on the site of a cave, and that the whole cosmology was sort of oriented from the cave <inaudible>?

Barbara: There certainly are some good cases of that, you get the cave at Teotihuacan for example, you get the high priest's grave at Chichen Itza which is built over a cave. I'm not certain that it's true everywhere, I don't think we've got anything like that at Tikal that I'm aware of, but it certainly would fit the cosmology, that if they could construct a mountain or temple, a *witz*, over a cave, then they've actually got an explorable and accessible system of underworld and earth and sky with the sanctuary on top of the temple being part of a replication of the sky. So when they talk about the sky-cave versus the earth-cave, the glyph that's been deciphered as *chik'in*, it may well be that the earth cave, the earth *chik'in* was- was a cave or chamber enclosed within the building. And the sky *chik'in* was the sanctuary on top of the building, so yeah, I think that they did use caves as a part of the formal architecture of sites when possible. I've been into the crack at Aguateca, saw a lot of wall building there, and an amazing staircase down in this crack that allowed easy access from the bottom of the very deep canyon up to the top, just a one-body-wide staircase built into the canyon, right up the tightest part of it.

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Q: Before we had spoken about the fact that the world tree was growing out of a mountain, which is built on a cave, the cosmology of the city was kind of constructed around this, the temple being a representation of a mountain with caves in it, could you describe how that works?

Barbara: Well I think that first of all we know that the concept of the mountain was extremely important to the Maya. Cities and temples were seen as artificial mountains. In fact, they were often constructed on mountains, as you have at Palenque, for example. And the world tree – I mean I'm not so certain at this point about the whole idea of the world tree. I'm beginning to get the feeling that it's a concept that may have had its day and so I'm not sure I really wanna go in that direction as far as trying to construct a cosmogram that involves a world tree with it's roots in the cave, although it's something that I may have said in the past.

Q: In exploring the caves, I think it was Petroglyph Cave in particular, you spoke about the fact that you were finding symbols in the caves that were communicating things having to do with trance states and were not writing, but were symbolic communication. You find that among the Olmec, where complex structures and symbols are used to indicate complex messages. Where do you draw the line between that and writing? The writing also has pictures in it, and complex symbols. Is it a continuum or is there real clear distinction between what is symbolic communication and what is writing, not just for the Maya but in general?

Barbara: Well I would say that writing should represent language and it might represent language in a crude way, it might be a simple pictograph strung together such that someone who's reading it can fill in the grammar. But it's obvious to me and to everyone who's working on the hieroglyphic script that- that in the case of Maya writing it represents language with a high degree of grammatical integrity. I mean it's- it's absolutely true to the spoken language, right down to the smallest affixes. So for me writing has to be equated on some level with language, and the symbols have to represent words which are unequivocally one on one, one on one correspondence between a symbol and a word. And I'm not so sure that these petroglyphs that we're looking at – in fact I'd say I am sure that these are probably not writing. They may interplay with writing, there may be symbols there that are seen in the writing system that have similar values, but the petroglyphs are –I'd say they're precursors to writing, or they're something that's, you know, a tangent.

Q: Let me read two or three statements that David Stewart actually to see what they trigger in your thoughts about the origin of Maya writing. “Writing appears fully formed,

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someone somewhere codified it in a single episode". Another one is "writing probably began with portable objects; monuments are a later development". The third one is that it evolved from single glyphs, monolithic glyphs, to ones that involved more components, "like a cell dividing".

What's your impression of the origin and then the development , early development of the script?

Barbara: Well first of all the point about the earliest forms of writing being toponyms and personal names. I think this is what we see among the Aztec, and it's what we see at San Bartolo as well. There are some short texts that, as far as I can tell, have not yet been read, at least not with any continuity. But we are seeing some evidence of name glyphs, and calendric glyphs, and perhaps place names, and so I think that those are probably the beginnings of writing because those would represent correspondences with language. A symbol represents a word but as far as a codification, I have no doubt that there were, you know, something equivalent to a committees of people who sat down and designed components of the script, probably pulled them together with components that had already arisen as part of the system of place names and personal names and formalized it with grammatical structure, there's no question that somebody sat down and said here's how we're going to write our language. So yeah, I agree completely that it's, you know, it leaped out as the result of some formal decision.

Q: What do you see as the evolution of it, how it changed over time?

Barbara: I don't really consider myself much of an authority on the early forms of the script, nor have I really looked very closely at the Mixe-Xoquean representations of it, but there's no question that it not only changes over time but changes over space, that each site has it's own style, and that sites that are in communication with each other tend to kind of share stylistic features as well as content. And that there is a development of much more elaborate form. I would say over the development of a classic civilization the script becomes much more elaborate and much more varied and at the same time there's a tremendous amount of continuity and constancy in terms of its meaning.

Substitution as a tool of decipherment

Q: As we get into the history of the decipherment in the 19th century, when people began to look at it, are there particular figures in that story that are fascinating to you or that you found particularly interesting for your work in terms of how they tackled it?

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Barbara: Well I don't know about so much the 19th century. There were certainly a lot of explorers who did some really amazing stuff in the 19th century and had some adventures I would have loved to have shared in, like Maudslay and Teobert Maler and so on, the people who pioneered some of the early ventures into Maya land and then took photographs that are still extremely valuable to us today. People who first started working on the structure of the script... you have Benjamin Whorf, early part of the 20th century, who was probably largely wrong but he was tackling it from the point of view that the script was a language which could be deciphered in a linguistic sense. And I very much admire that. His career was cut short, he died rather young, and it's hard to know how far he would have been able to take it had he lived and had even a tenth of the information that we have now, so he's one of the people that, even though he was largely wrong, his approach I think could have become something really productive.

Q: Moving forward then to the era of Thompson and Beyer and the beginning of the use of substitution of a method of getting at the script... Is there's something that you can say about that in terms, of in general, about when an epigrapher looks at a text, what are the things that they look for and what are the tools that they use, substitution being one of the things that occurs to me? How do you go about it, you're looking at a text; what are you looking for to try get a handle on it?

Barbara: Well I think Thompson was certainly aware of substitutions, he had a keen eye for substitutions and yet I don't think he really understood what it was that was going on. But he certainly documented substitution in sequences of glyphs, and he didn't understand of course that we were dealing with titles and names. But Proskouriakoff was the one who really I think demonstrated that. I think observation of substitutions is very important, and it's really been what's been needed, and what has driven our ability to decipher new phonetic signs.

Q: Taking it a step back from that – could you explain what is a substitution, what does an epigrapher mean by a substitution, how do you – if you're looking at a text how do you recognize that, how do you identify that?

Barbara: Well you have to have some sort of control over a context, you know, a sequence of glyphs that repeats often enough, wherein if you find a new glyph replacing a different glyph – if you have a sequence A, B, C, D and you find that B in a couple of cases is replaced by E, then you can make the supposition that B and E are equivalent, it's a working hypothesis. If otherwise the sequence is identical, turns up in identical environments, then it's a fair hypothesis that two things that substitute for one another are semantically and perhaps phonologically equivalent. Now the question is, how do you

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know whether they're *both* semantically and phonologically equivalent. Well, that takes further testing, and so you look for both of those glyphs in other contexts, to see whether or not they seem to substitute for one another in other places besides this one controlled environment. And if that's true, then you're closer to saying that they are not only semantically but phonologically equivalent, or maybe they're simply phonologically equivalent. Once we discovered that we had the syllabary, and that not every glyph represents a word, in fact that there's a whole category of signs which are simply consonant-vowel syllables (and occasional vowel syllables) – then you can be looking for that kind of substitution, phonetic substitution in the spelling of words.

Q: So with substitution, how do you determine whether something being substituted is for example just the same phrase but a different name, rather than a semantic equivalent?

Barbara: Well you just have to have a lot of data, you know, if for example you've got fifteen different representations of the name of a certain king, and at some of the larger sites you might well have that many. Then it's fair to say that that sequence of names is gonna have some constants in it, and it's going to shrink and expand because it's clear that some of these king names could be, you know, presented in long form or in short form. But you're gonna find that there are constants that are there every time. And if you find that you start seeing substitutions, you can suppose that either that's a new item that wasn't told you before, or it's a phonetic substitution, or perhaps a semantic substitution for an existing item. I'm not sure I'm making this clear but there is just one set of data right there, and then you've got to look at those particular elements, those particular signs which appear to be substituting for one another in that king name. And at that point, draw upon everything you know about the rest of the corpus, and say where else do I see those signs, do they substitute for one another in a completely different environment and if they do, what does that mean? Is it a phonetic substitution, that's probably the first place to start, is let's assume that they're phonetically equivalent. And, you know, in fact that's really been David Stuart's strategy, and he managed to decipher a lot of phonetic signs, just by applying that basic rule. That if they substitute for one another and appear to be spelling words, appear to be clustered in such a way that they're providing an initial consonant, a vowel and a final consonant, that they probably are phonetically equivalent.

The methodology by which the PSS was deciphered

Q: When the PSS first began to be a part of things, when Mike Coe began first looking at the PSS, what was going on? Talk about the PSS as the prime example of substitution.

Barbara: Well he called it the Primary Standard Sequence because it was Primary in the sense that it was the first and largest text that usually encountered on vases. And it was Standard in the sense that it had predictable components that were almost always there, and it had both short and long forms, and he had a large enough body of material to work with that he had lots of examples of both short and long forms, and was able to then develop a structure with predictable sequencing. Such that he could say that, for example, the initial sign, the mirror sign if it was present, and it often was, was always first, and that would be followed by several other signs. The “God N” sign was one, the step sign was another and then the – I don’t know what he called the “ye” sign, what we now call the “ye”, but he recognized the deer head form of the Chi, and certainly the Winged-Quincunx, that was something that was very commonly there. And then the stuff that followed it, finally with the fish glyph, which he called fish, which we now understand to be *cacao*. He provided us with a structural analysis of the text that made it clear that there was reason to it, even though to my knowledge he didn’t really identify semantic values for the components of the Primary Standard Sequence. That was that was all work that came a little later, starting in the mid 80’s.

Q: He identified it as a funerary mantra. Why was that?

Barbara: Well I think his primary motivation for identifying it as a funerary chant, that kind of underworld mantra, is that the imagery on the pottery was so overwhelmingly funerary or underworld related, that he reached the conclusion, which to some degree maybe true, that a lot of this pottery was designed for placement in tombs, and communicated information about the afterlife and about the underworld, so it seemed like a natural assumption that the repeating text was a type of mantra, and I believe he used that word, a formula that one might chant or recite as part of death rights.

Her experience of the early Maya Workshops at Austin

Q: Talk about your first experience with the Maya workshop. I believe that’s how you first got involved in the hieroglyphs. Is that right?

Barbara MacLeod: It started a little earlier than that, because I spent five years in Belize doing cave archeology for the Belize government. And I had some exposure to the hieroglyphs because they had a library there in the archeology department, and it had Thompson and Morley and just kind of a lot of archeology standards. But Thompson’s *Introduction to Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* was there. And I started reading it, and I taught myself the Maya calendar.

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I actually made, when I was living in Belize, a calendar board, my first calendar board that involved a series of cards and my first one had cards about so-by-so set up with the same format as a stela, the initial series. And you could take the cards that would change every day, take them off and put one behind and have another one pop up in front. And so I started keeping the calendar. I figured out what the correlation was and started keeping the calendar. Taught myself the day names. Taught myself the month names and the images for them. And that was really kind of how I kind of got my feet wet with the hieroglyphic writing.

But I also knew, and had known ever since I was a child, that I'm fascinated with languages, and that I had a particular talent for languages. And I remember thinking when I was in junior high school that it would be fun to spend my life studying historical linguistics. I don't think I even knew the term at that time, but I knew that I wanted to do that kind of stuff. And I was studying Spanish at that time, and I would go to the library and I would pull out books on Catalan and French and Spanish grammar and earlier forms of Spanish grammar. And I would just be holed up in the library devouring this kind of stuff.

But then somewhere along the line, I realized that romance linguistics had largely been done. Maybe not, maybe there are people who are still chasing obscure little aspects of it. But I wanted a territory that was unexplored. When I first encountered the Maya via the archeology in the caves, and got interested in the hieroglyphs, I realized there's a language here. I want to learn this language. And I started learning Yucatec Maya when I was living in Belize. Actually that first summer I learned a little bit about it, and then I went back and studied Yucatec Maya with Michael Owen at the University of Washington in Seattle. And I have to say that I owe a great debt of gratitude to Michael for turning me on to Yucatec and making the grammar so accessible to me.

I swallowed it up. I just ate it up and devoured it, and I wanted more. When I went back to live in Belize, then I had access to Yucatec speakers now and again, and also Mopan speakers and Kekchi speakers. And I was there busy making notes on linguistic data, and these were people that I went to caves with. The reason I was out there in the bush with them was because they were taking me to caves. And so I was making notes on birds and animals and trees and caves and rivers. The natural world was my lexicon. The doorway to those languages for me was, apart from the grammar, it was the terms about the natural world. That's what I documented most.

I knew that I wanted to study the glyphs. I started out by teaching myself the calendar, and when I chose to come to Austin, Linda had not gotten here yet. I came here in 1976,

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and I think she first arrived to teach a workshop- well, maybe she just came and taught for a semester in 1977, but it was only part of the year. And I think there may have been a Maya workshop that was associated with that one-semester course that she taught. But I was just sitting at her feet rapt, because here was someone who really knew as much as anyone knew about the rest of the Maya writing system, not just the calendar. And so Linda was a tremendous fountainhead for me, a source of knowledge and inspiration, and her enthusiasm was just infectious. So I owe a great debt of gratitude to Linda for just opening the door wide for me.

Now, here at the University of Texas, Brian Stross was also teaching. I took a course from him on Mayan languages so he helped me gain access to the other Mayan languages, the other ones that turned out to be extremely relevant for the study of the script. He, himself, had studied Tseltal and so he directed me to sources on Cholan languages and other Mayan languages and taught that survey course, which was just a wonderful open door for me, as well. So I also owe a lot to Bryan for helping me get into Mayan linguistics, which I also just devoured as soon as I had access. I just soaked it up.

Within the first year or two of my graduate studies, I had pretty much internalized the grammars of ten Mayan languages, and started to get pretty suspicious that these were the languages I really needed for work on the hieroglyphic writing. And as you may know, the first decipherments of grammatical components of the script were my work. That was really exciting. It's not only that you've gotten access to a system, but now you're far enough along that you can start making contributions. And it just really whetted my appetite, because it became obvious pretty early on that we're dealing, not so much with Yucatecan languages, but with Cholan languages. And I may well have been one of the very first people to say that this stuff is Cholan. These are Cholan languages. It became pretty obvious when you look at the maps of the distribution of these languages in the 16th century, when people first came and made contact and said, o.k., then over here we have Chorti and over here we have Manche Chol, and over here we have Yucatec speakers. Over here we have Tseltal or Tsotzil. If you look at the distribution of these languages on this map, that it fit the Cholan languages together with the distribution of many of the sites that have hieroglyphic writing.

That was just a wonderful discovery for me, and to see that I could actually find stuff. To me it looked like, here's the stuff just lying all around. It's here for me to pick it up. And I thought that was just wonderful. That was sweet. It's like destiny awaited me. So that was really a exciting time, and we're talking now about 1978, 1979, when I first started identifying grammatical features in the script and correlating them with languages we had.

Q: In 1978, the first workshop started. Could you describe what that was like, the early years of the workshops. What the atmosphere was. How the dynamic was.

Barbara MacLeod: Well, there may have actually been one in 1977. You'll have to correct me. And I don't think that I actually made the one in 1978 because I was in the field doing cave archeology. I think I left Austin in late January and didn't return until the end of the summer, because I was doing the Petroglyph Cave project and Danny Puleston came down and joined us for part of that time. And then I traveled to Palenque for the Mesa Redonda with him. That was the one where we presented that paper together, "Pathways Into Darkness" and then just shortly after that he was struck by lightning at Chichen Itza and was killed.

I spent the rest of the summer with the Lacondon, learning Lacondon and documenting the grammar. So I missed the '78 workshop. So I remember one from '77. I may be making this up, but I remember one from '77 and I don't remember really who all attended. I mean, I know there were people who came in from out of town but I was so new to all of this that I didn't really know that much about the field of Maya studies. But I did know that there were enormous numbers of people who were attracted to Linda's enthusiasm and that she was just perfect. She loved to get up there and strut on stage and have an audience of people who just soaked it all up. And I was just fascinated with this. And I was really impressed with the generosity with which she gave it all away, like all this secret stuff. And she's just giving it to us. And that's really how the workshops began, and now, of course, began to get my feet wet. I came back from the field briefly in '79, and then I went off again on a Fulbright. I was in Mexico for a year, '79 and '80. So I missed '79 as well.

Q: Don't worry about the dates. I'm more concerned about what the --

Barbara MacLeod: What went on in the workshop.

Q: What the feel of it was, yeah.

Barbara MacLeod: Oh, well, after I started to get my feet wet and find out about who was in the field and who was really actively working on hieroglyphic decipherment, it became obvious that Linda was at the top of her game. And people were flocking from all over the country, and beginning to be from all over the world, to hear her present this stuff.

And it was just exciting. It was like being kind of on the edge of history, surfing this creative wave, around the edge of discovery. And discoveries would take place in the

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midst of the workshop. Things would be found, and Linda would be up there on stage going, oh, wow. And there'd be all this interaction between Linda and the audience. And there'd be seasoned scholars tossing out stuff and Linda tossing it back, and decipherments taking place on stage. Now some of them later turned out not to be correct, and some of them turned out to be correct. And I think that's really the way that a productive frontier is. Everybody is experimenting and exploring and testing hunches on each other. And so this was going on constantly. But Linda was really the source of the chemistry of it all. It was magic. It really was.

So I had the privilege of attending an awful lot of those workshops. Now, there were a few that I missed when I was out of the country, but I think I made out of all of those, however many, 20 or so that Linda taught, probably made 17 of them.

Q: We talked earlier about the importance of the Xerox machine in this era. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Barbara MacLeod: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I mean, the Xerox machine, well, when did the first come along? I remember that Michael Owen – as a matter of fact, speaking of him, he bailed from academia in order to start a Xerox company, called the Copy Mart back in Seattle. And he was reproducing dictionaries, Maya dictionaries. And he gave me a copy of the San Francisco dictionary that he had reproduced. And I thought, this is really wonderful.

There's no question that Xeroxing made it possible to share data. It didn't have to be bound and published in books. People could get field drawings and spread them around. Or people could, with permission, copy things out of books and spread them around. And so suddenly we all access to great portions of the corpus. I've got several spiral bound volumes up there of field drawings from Maya sites. So it made it possible for people like myself to get their hands on the data. And there's no question that if you want to be a Maya epigrapher, you have to have access to a large amount of data. It's the only way you can really, I think, practice the art of decipherments. You have to have the data. You have to have enough of it memorized that you can sift it mentally when you see something, and make a connection. You have to have enough of a trail within your brain cells already to know where to go in the materials that you have, to chase down other examples of it and prove or disprove the hunch that you had.

So, yeah, Xeroxing was a major step forward. And, of course, beyond that the Internet has just taken it to another exponential level as far as communication and shared data. I mean, I'm fascinated with, if you don't mind my jumping ahead, fascinated with what's

been possible via email and attachments and Justin Kerr's online database. It's just been a phenomenal thing.

Q: Thank you. That was wonderful.

I want to talk about the early workshop days. You were one of the people, probably one of the few people in that group who came to it with a really profound knowledge of a number of Maya languages.

Barbara MacLeod: Um hm.

Q: What was it like to be in that environment, in that milieu, in that discovery stage, coming at it with that different and special heat.

Barbara MacLeod: Well, I felt that it was almost destined. There was definitely a strong sense of destiny about my participation early on, because I knew that I'd always wanted to do this kind of thing. And now, suddenly, here it's being set before me, this feast of information that I can now incorporate with what I know about Maya languages and turn around and give something back that's really worth something. It was wonderful. I think that when we look back on our lives and consider what was really worthwhile and what was not so worthwhile, I look at that early period in my exploration of the Maya script as being one of the just peak experiences. I could bring my talent and my enthusiasm, something I truly love, together with something that I worked hard to acquire, and meet this other body of data that represents the equally enthusiastic and heartfelt contributions of other scholars, and say, wow, we, together, can explore the universe. We can do amazing things together. It was great. It was really great.

Her contributions to the understanding of ancient Maya grammar

Q: The particular areas in which you began to make original contributions was in the area of grammatical components. Could you describe that a little bit so it makes sense to non-grammaticians.

Barbara MacLeod: Well, Mayan languages have what are called affixes on verbs. I was particularly interested in how the verbs worked. And I had committed to memory the verbal systems of all of these Mayan languages. Not all of the existing Mayan languages, but the Cholan and Yucatecan languages, which are most directly related to the script. And so I had them pretty much in my head. And when I started seeing how

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some of the phonetic signs combined to spell them, then I realized, I think for the first time, that we had absolute grammatical integrity in the script, that they are representing their spoken language. This is without any kind of shorthand. This is the absolute representation of the spoken language. And that all I needed was just a little bit of proof to just open up the road and say, o.k., well, here's the "wan" suffix which goes on positional verbs. And I found it on the "seating" verb, which, you know, is its canonical positional root, "to sit". And so if the "wan" suffix appears on positional roots that means that the other affixes that we expect on other kinds of roots, are also going to be here in the script. Let's go get them!

And so not long after that, I discovered the "la" suffix, which is also found on positional roots. And as it turns out is actually earlier in the Cholan languages. And Vickie Bricker also – she's another person who, around the same time, had been working on grammatical approaches to decipherment. She also independently came up with the "la" suffix and somewhere in the midst of all of this, we discovered one another's work and became colleagues. I mean, I was just a graduate student, but she was very interested in my work, and I was very interested in her work. And she came out with a book, *The Grammar of Maya Writing*, not long after that. And so I found that it was really important for me at that point to be taken seriously by established scholars, people with PhD's and professorial positions. And it just really helped me realize that I had something to give. So I just kept pursuing it, going after the verbal system, and finding verbal affixes and then moving beyond just the structure of the verbs into the syntax of the texts.

Q: You were talking about working on grammatical components, and then moving on to the area of the syntax. Could you explain what the difference is, and what kind of things you were finding.

Barbara MacLeod: Well, syntax has to do with how sentences are built, and how the components of a sentence relate to one another, where the subject and the object go. And with respect to Maya texts, and their syntax, you have to also correlate that with the historical narrative, or the narrative itself. You have to understand how the narrative works, how the calendric punctuation works, and then, now, of course, how the protagonist present their own history within that text. And then to understand how the grammatical structure of all of that can be made sense of in terms of what you know about syntax of the existing Mayan languages. So that's really become, I think, my area of major interest, is how do you identify syntactic integrity in the script, and then turn around and use it to decipher unknown signs, because you can say, o.k., here's an unknown sign, and it occurs in this syntactic environment and this syntactic environment.

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That allows you to triangulate on what it can be. Can it be just a noun? Is it a verb root? Is it an adjective? Can it sometimes be both a noun and an adjective? Well, then if you know these things about it, then you can immediately throw out a lot of things. You can narrow the field down by casting out a lot of things that don't work. And so that's really been lately, I'd say, one of my real big interests, is how to use an understanding of syntax to decipher undeciphered signs.

Q: Could you give an example of how that works so we can illustrate what you mean by syntactic environment and syntactic integrity?

Barbara MacLeod: Well, the Primary Standard Sequence is a perfect situation. You've got hundreds and hundreds of examples of it. And it dawned on me fairly early on when I started looking at it, that it had to have syntactic integrity, that all of these patterns that Michael Coe had discovered about it indicated that it was either one or perhaps two sentences. And we're talking about a vessel. And David Stuart was involved in the decipherment of the Winged-Quincunx, but so was I, along with Bryan Strauss. We actually wrote a paper back in the mid-'80s called *The Winged-Quincunx* in which we proposed that it's root was either "uch" or "uk", meaning to drink. And then it became obvious that this is a possessed noun, meaning that this drinking vessel with this instrumental suffix on it, had to be possessed by someone, so it's owner must be what follows, but what immediately follows is a prepositional phrase. It's got a "ti" or a "ta", which we know in these languages means it's a preposition that means "to", "at" or "for", or in some cases "from". But in this case, "for" was probably the best way to look at it. And so what followed immediately was stuff that I worked on and Nikolai worked on, and David Stuart was the one who, of course, nailed the fish glyph as chocolate. And that was a major breakthrough.

So now we had some more syntactic integrity. We had a vessel for some kind of chocolate, which belonged to a nominal phrase that followed it. And those nominal phrases were very complex and in some cases they include emblem glyphs, which have been known about since the late '50s or so with Heinrich Berlin's work on emblem glyphs. So we've got historical individuals being named as the possessors of these vessels. And then there's all this stuff out in front, which included the initial sign, the mirror sign, and what we assumed must have been dedicatory information. And then David Stuart – you know, a lot of it was really interactive. David Stuart deciphered the "tsib" glyph meaning to paint or write. And that made it really clear that what was being talked about before the Winged-Quincunx or vase glyph had to do with the painting of the surface of the vase. And so I went into that section of the P.S.S., hammer and tongs, and then worked out the verbal affixes that went on the "tsib" verb. And, in fact, wrote

my dissertation in 1990 about the Primary Standard Sequence. And I devoted a large chunk of it to its grammatical structure and its syntactic structure. So there's an example where you had a kind of controlled environment, hundreds and hundreds of very formulated texts, which gave you just a dozen different ways or more of looking at grammatical structure.

Q: Moving around, but you actually saw the *Blood of Kings* Show.

Barbara MacLeod: Yes, I attended the *Blood of Kings* Show.

Q: Could you describe what that experience was like, and what affect that had on the field.

Barbara MacLeod: The *Blood of Kings* show was an eye opener for a lot of people. I had the good fortune of having already been here and having heard Linda talk about a lot of what came out in the *Blood of Kings* show. But, of course, no one was prepared for the just amazing quality of the show itself, the beautiful objects. The opportunity to really see them up close, and to hear all the presentations and just get immersed in this proposition about the royal charter and blood and the lineage, and how vital it was to the whole structure of elite society. It may have been a little overboard, as we now see it. We don't see blood everywhere now. But there certainly is a lot of blood, there's no question. You look at San Bartolo, and blood is everywhere. I think it takes you right back to the pinnacle of the *Blood of Kings*, as blood being so fundamental to the march of life, of all of existence. It's the reciprocal sacrifice. And humans give blood to the gods and the gods, in turn, give life and everything that goes with it, to the humans. So the *Blood of Kings* was just a jaw dropper in that respect, as well as being a wonderful show, just wonderful pieces. So, yes, I was there, and it was really exciting.

Q: Thank you. Talk a little bit about Linda, and what she was like to work with, what she was like to be around as a student and to attempt to collaborate with. David Stuart once told me, he said, "Well, Linda was a bulldozer", you know. She just moved forward.

Barbara Macleod: Yeah. She was great.

Q: And, you know, whatever was in the way. Did you have experience of that as well?

Barbara Macleod: Absolutely. Well, this came up in my conversation with David as well. We talked about the fact that Linda freely borrowed from other people's work and presented it as her own. And she did that to me a number of times. One of the central themes in *Maya Cosmos*, the story of Quiriguá Stela 3 and its connection to the three

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stones of creation. That was all my work, you know, and I was reduced to a footnote in the back of the book. And so I was, you know, I was very hurt by that, and just dozens of other little things that she took from me. Not so little in some cases.

And you know, maybe she felt that these ideas were important enough, they needed to be out there and contextualized, and she was tremendous at synthesizing and contextualizing. Much better than I could ever have been. She could see the big picture right away and take what I had discovered and write it large. And I think that she felt that that gave her the right to be the first person to say it. And I have really tried very hard throughout my career to not do that kind of thing. To always give credit where credit is due. I think it's extremely important. Just because the emotions run high and also because the field is so exciting. You know, when people discover things they want credit, because they worked hard to be able to get to the point where they can make a contribution. And Linda, she was a bulldozer. She would just roll right over people's feelings and take their stuff and perhaps toss a bone of credit, but it was nowhere near what was appropriate. And yeah, a lot of people have stories like that about Linda. And especially her graduate students who provided her with an enormous amount of stuff to take from. So yep that is ... it's true.

Q: It's a real issue, beyond the issue of credit and all that, whether it's better to get everything out there and get it out there for people to see right away, whatever the errors might be, and just share it, or better to save it and wait, and take a year or two to get the publisher, to make sure you get your facts straight. What do you think?

Barbara Macleod: I kind of sit in the middle. You know, I've played both ends of that continuum. And I think that you have to take into consideration that if you are recognized as a source of wisdom and truth about the Maya, that you have to, you owe it to your audience, to not just keep opening your mouth to change feet. That you need to have some discipline and take a little time to sift and cull before you just deliver it. Because people will take it. People will take it and run with it. They'll love it. They'll want it. They'll eat it up. And it may turn out to be wrong, and I've done that sort of thing more times than I can remember. And I think it's made me, you know, as a more mature epigrapher made me more cautious.

But at the same time I fully believe in the process of sharing hunches. This is one of the things that I just really love about the internet is that you know, you can get online and share hunches with other people who understand what you're working with, who have the same level of expertise or a compatible level of expertise. And toss ideas around without having to go out there and publish them or even you know, say them on stage before an

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audience of lay people. Kick 'em around amongst colleagues and then go through that sifting and sorting process. So I very much approve of that process. I don't think it's healthy and I don't think it's productive for any of us to just hole up in our little ivory towers and you know, do our research for years and years and years, and not say a word about what we're doing until we think we've finally got it perfect. 'Cause we'll never get it perfect that way. And I don't think we'll ever get it perfect, period. But we're never going to be able to do it on our own 'cause there's too much stuff. There's no way that any one of us can possibly control it all. That synthesis and collaboration I think is really the research that's from here on, the right path. And so I'm very active in collaboration. The work that I'm really excited about right now is a collaboration between myself and three other people. There are four of us that are actively engaged in daily email communications about all this stuff and I view it as a collaboration. When we get around to publishing it, then it's going to be published as a collaboration.

So I don't where that whole thread started, but I'm as I said, kind of in the middle. And I'm really grateful for the Internet because it allows that opportunity to kick hunches around and share them amongst your colleagues, and get these ideas, get the wacky ones out there and get the good ones out there, sort the wheat from the chaff. And then when you've gotten a chance to sift through it and finesse it a little bit, then present it to a lay audience, I'm perfectly, completely in agreement with presenting this material to lay audiences. Why not. You know, it's not just for scholars. It's for everybody.

Anybody who loves the Maya has a right to hear about what all this secret stuff is all about. It shouldn't be secret. The only part of it that should be secret is the mystery. It's the idea that this is you know, it's like having a time machine to be able to read these texts. And to me, it's a rare privilege to be able to read 'em out loud in the language in which they were written. Maybe sometimes I'm the first person to actually say them out loud ever, since they were written, or since they were last you know, viewed by the populations of those cities. The first person in more than a thousand years to read them out loud. That's a privilege. But I don't feel that I have any more right to that knowledge than someone who's not a professional at all, who just loves the Maya. Everybody has a right I think, to know about the things that they love and they get those secrets from the people who've taken the time to find them out.

Q: Thank you.

Barbara Macleod: Hmm-mm.

Her ideas on the language of the hieroglyphs.

Q: I'd like to talk a little bit more about the language of the glyphs. We went down and we were filming workshops in the Highlands where people are learning the glyphs and connecting with their past, and there's some people in the epigraphic community who say well you know, glyphs were in the lowlands. They were at Tikal. They weren't in the highlands in that part of Guatemala. You know, they didn't have hieroglyphs there. And other folks saying, no they did have hieroglyphic texts. What's your sense? Were there hieroglyphs in the highlands?

Barbara Macleod: Generally not. No. There were not. Although you've got transitional areas in the highlands. Chincultic for example up in you know, the highlands of Chiapas... I mean Tonina is a kind of transitional site, but if you go to Tonina you'll see that part of it's in rainforest and part of it's in pine forest. So it sits right on an eco-zone boundary. But generally speaking, what we call the Maya Highlands in Guatemala, and the sites that are there, there's no evidence that there was hieroglyphic writing there, although we do have evidence of hieroglyphic writing at Kaminaljuyu. I'm not certain it was in a Mayan language, but there are glyphs there that are shared with the Maya scripts. But in general I would say that the highland languages did not participate in the writing system. It was a certain group of lowland languages that were the ones that pushed it along.

Q: The Tedlocks for example say: the Popol Vuh's clearly a transcription of a Ki'che' text that had a hieroglyphic original, there's a 1722 Ki'che' manuscript which lines up perfectly with the alignment of the Dresden, and I guess the Madrid.

Barbara Macleod: Well I don't know that that really is proof. And I'm not saying they couldn't have had hieroglyphic writing. We just don't have any evidence of it. Now what does that mean? It means we don't have monumental sculpture. We don't have pottery that clearly originated at those sites, although there's a lot of pottery that was imported into the highlands from the lowlands with hieroglyphs on them. Surely the people that lived there knew about hieroglyphic writing. We don't have codices, but then what does that mean? Does that mean they didn't have them? You know, codices are so perishable that if they had existed we wouldn't expect to find evidence of them. So you know, I would say that that's still kind of a mysterious area. Did the educated elite of highland communities know about hieroglyphic writing? Surely they knew about it. They knew it existed. There was too much communication back and forth between the highlands and the lowlands for them not to know a whole lot about what was going on in the lowlands. Did they actually employ it themselves? Well I honestly don't know. If they did it must've

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been on perishable materials. But the other thing to bear in mind is that it's well documented among people that we consider to be non-literate, people who don't have a writing system of any kind to have a very rich oral tradition, such that they have the ability to memorize long, long narratives word for word. I mean they start out being trained at this as children. They learn the narratives of their culture such that they can repeat them word for word. Long, long stories. And then pass those on generation through generation without really much change. And I can also accept that the Popol Vuh may have been a highland narrative that was passed on in just that manner. And that the fact that you can line up portions of it with the codices wouldn't surprise me at all, because everybody had a strong oral tradition. Even the people that had a written tradition I think probably also had a strong oral tradition as well and it's all partaking of the same great myth. So I don't know if I've answered the question. I think I've kind of dodged the question by saying that we don't have the hard evidence and it's possible that just a strong oral tradition within a relatively undisturbed culture can provide that narrative continuity.

Q: Could we talk about what language the hieroglyphs are written in? I think last time we talked was right after the 1999 [Austin Conference] when Steve Houston, David Stuart and John Robertson presented their evidence that it was ancestral Cholti. Could you give me your take on all that?

Barbara Macleod: Well I would say yes they're right but they shouldn't be quite so quick to jump to conclusions about it. There's a lot of evidence that the Choltian branch of Cholan, or what Gary Kauffman has called eastern Cholan, has preserved a lot of features that are found in the script. But I have also found a lot of things in the script that I think are more clearly preserved in western Cholan. And so this is a territory where we're still kind of duking it out. We're still working it out, and duking it out as well. There's definitely a little competitiveness about this, because my perception is that Steve, John and Dave to a lesser extent – I think it's primarily Steve and John that have driven this along, the idea of the Choltian hypothesis for the scripts – I think it's a little premature because it doesn't take into account what I think are equally important features that are preserved in western Cholan languages, and one of which is something that I have a long paper on in that book by Soren Vickmann that just came out titled "A World in a Grain of Sand". It's my recent magnum opus about the function of the *yah* suffix – T126 - on verbs, and also the function of the *hi* suffix – I think it's T88 - on verbs, and what the two do when they're sequenced together.

John Robertson and I spent a year duking it out via amiable, very lengthy emails, and you know, we reached points of agreement, but I think we finally just realized that we're both

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going to exhaust ourselves over the disagreements, and we agreed to finally stop doing it because we were both losing sleep. I mean John and I are very much alike in that regard is that we, you know, we get a bone and we worry it to death. And we spent a year doing this. I've got all the emails, it's quite a long saga. But as a result of all that interaction with John, which I thought was tremendously valuable, and I think he feels the same way, I was able to kind of pull all of my various scattered thoughts about it all together and write that paper. And that paper, if one thinks it's correct, gives an equally strong argument for the western branch of Cholan being direct heirs of the scribal tradition.

The language of the script is clearly Cholan for the most part. Now there are exceptions. There are other sites where the language was probably Tzotzilán. There are clearly examples of Yucatecan texts or texts that have clear Yucatecan components in the northern area, up in Yucatán. But the massive body of data is clearly Cholan. And I would not at this point say we know it's going to be eastern Cholan versus western Cholan or what John would call Choltean versus Cholan Chontal. I just think it's premature to try to say that it's one or the other. It was probably both. You know. It's a more complex picture than any of us yet knows. This is one of the directions we're going next, is to answer those questions. And I don't feel we have answered them, and I don't think that people should claim that they have.

Q: Could you describe the kind of evidence that one uses to determine what the language You've got the hieroglyphs, you've got all these various languages, how do you link up one to the other? How do you say "this looks like a construction from this language?"

Barbara Macleod: Well you look at the vocabulary. You look at just the full range of vocabulary that you have confidence about from the scripts. Look at all the nouns, look at all the verb roots, look at all the adjective roots, and then you look at all the affixes, the morphemes that go on nouns and verbs and adjectives, and just look at them as just a pile, an inventory. And you say, okay, which of these daughter languages does this most closely resemble? And it's really pretty straightforward, I think, except that you're faced with the problem of retention versus loss, that the daughter languages may or may not have had in their own ancestry a lot of those same things that are in the script, but for whatever reason - and there are a lot of different reasons that push whether a language is conservative and retains things or whether a language is innovative and brings in new things and then loses other things. And all of these processes are just very much alive and well in language. And so to look at the Cholan languages and say okay, Cholan has this, and Chontal has this, and Cholti has this, and Chorti has this, and these two right now look just a little bit statistically more like the script, therefore we're gonna say you know, these are the heirs of the script, what you're doing is you're comparing bits and pieces of

data. You're looking at the inventory of the script versus the inventory - both the lexicon and the morphology - of the daughter languages and trying to make a statistical connection.

Q: Could you rephrase that?

Barbara Macleod: Yeah.

Q: The phrase "daughter languages" is not going to mean anything to most people, so if you can say it in a way which means something to the layman.

Barbara Macleod: You have an ancestral language, and we're not talking about the very distant ancestor of Proto-maya. We're talking about the Cholan language family, and you have its descendant languages - and there are four of them. And the descendant languages now you know, we have Chorti as a living language, we have Chontal as a still living language but dying out soon. There aren't very many speakers left of Chontal. And we have Chol. And Chol is very much a living language. There are you know, probably 30 thousand speakers of Chol. I'm not sure how many there are of Chorti but you know, it's going to be in the thousands. Of Chontal it may only be about 50 people, but we have enough information about these languages that we have what we can call an inventory of their vocabulary and of their grammatical bits and pieces. And we're now able to compile enough information about the script. We've proceeded far enough in the decipherment of the script that we can say, okay here's a big pile of data about its inventory of words. Its nouns, its adjectives, its verb roots, and its affixes, the things that go on all of those roots. And so when we talk about direct relationships and which is most like the other, we're comparing those inventories.

So it's clear from those comparisons that the Cholan languages are more closely related in general to the script than are the Yucatecan languages or Tzeltal and Tzotzil. But it's also clear that sites on the periphery probably participated in , or reflected, other languages like Tzeltal and Tzotzil on the western side, and like Yucatecan on the north-eastern side.

Q: You're talking about comparing large bodies of material, and yet in the arguments as I've seen them played out to some degree, it seems to come down to like--

Barbara Macleod: Three affixes, right.

Q: One identifying feature you know, something you called the dictic suffix--

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Barbara Macleod: Dictic, dictic yeah.

Q: -- The specific thing is the proof this only exists in one language. Is it more a matter of the big piles of characteristics of the language or is it these little totally idiosyncratic markers the key?

Barbara Macleod: Well I think it's important to look at all of them, but I really think that the bigger picture is the better picture right now. The more data you've got, the more data you're willing to actually knuckle down and compare, the more likely you are to come out with a reliable answer. Because apart from the fact that languages inherit a whole body of stuff from their ancestors, that languages also go through processes that can in very short order change that stuff. They can get pushed into areas where now suddenly they're dealing with, on a daily basis, people that speak a very different Mayan language.

You know, the Spanish conquest changed things dramaticall, and we're just beginning to figure out what it did to these languages. Not only the imposition of Spanish grammar and Spanish vocabulary on these languages - and there's a lot of processes involved in that. You know, people become bilingual. Native speakers of Mayan languages become bilingual in Spanish and then they bring stuff in from Spanish. They bring stuff in intentionally, they bring stuff in unintentionally. And it all affects the language that they're speaking now, and the language that their children inherit. The Spanish conquest broke up communities, destroyed communities, eliminated languages or pushed them into other communities. Like the Cholti speakers - if they weren't wiped out by the Spanish they were absorbed by the Kekchi because they got driven into Kekchi territory or relocated there, and the people who used to speak Cholti were absorbed, in my understanding, by the Kekchi. Now in the process, Cholti disappeared as a separate community, a linguistic community, but a lot of Cholti words went into Kekchi. And if you go look at Kekchi you can tease them out. People have been doing that kind of work.

So things happen. Particularly when social change happens rapidly and dramatically, things happen to language that can cause some of the inventory to just be lost. And then you look at what's left, and you say well, here's Chontal for example. It doesn't have this, this, and this and this that we find in the script, but does that mean that it never did? Not at all. We can't answer that question because we don't know what that speech community went through. We don't know what they've lost. All we know is what they've retained. So that's why I say it's important to be really, really conservative and look at as much data as you can. And all I'm willing to say at this point is that it's Cholan and yes, I know about the features that they've identified as Cholti. In fact I was very much

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involved in identifying several of those. I know all about 'em. But I'm looking at the whole picture you know, and I'd like to say that I think it's premature.

Q: In other words that they've said that there's a feature that's unique to Cholti, who knows that it wasn't unique also to several other languages a thousand years ago.

Barbara Macleod: Who knows that Cholan and Chontal didn't have it, exactly.

Q: Okay. What is your sense of how the glyphs functioned in ancient Maya society? Who was writing them? Who was reading them? What was the range of things that they were writing given that it was you know, probably broader than what we have now? How did they function?

Barbara Macleod: Well, taking into account they must have written them on a lot of perishable materials that we have no access to and no knowledge of, it's pretty clear that it was of and by and for the elite. Now there's been a lot of speculation that at times of great pomp and circumstance the main plaza was filled with people would come in from the outlying areas. And presumably they did. Presumably when there were major events taking place a lot of the peasant population came in and witnessed it. There might have been a certain level on which the monuments were recognizable or the texts were recognizable. I mean, they could've had components that might have been recognizable.

But I truly don't think that that's all that important. I really think that probably most of the peasant population did not know how to read the glyphs. And I would say in support of that is that we're still speculating about whether the elite populations of outlying areas knew how to read the glyphs. You know, this question about whether the elite of the highlands knew how to read the glyphs, and if they didn't then why should we expect the peasant populations of the lowlands to know how to read the glyphs. No, I think it was basically a secret, an arcane body of knowledge that not everyone had access to. The elite sent their youths to academies to learn to become scribes, and that it was, you know, protected knowledge for the most part. Even though there may well have been components of it that had wider recognition. But one of the things that's really curious is that when you look at the stuff that's on pottery, this really throws the question open.

Now that I've said that, let's talk about this question of quote-unquote "pseudoglyphs" on pottery where you get Primary Standard Sequence texts, or simulations of them, that look like they were created by less than literate people. And certainly you get a wide range of capability in terms of artistic production, you know. You get things that were painted by obviously master painters, you get things that were painted by their apprentices attempting to copy them and you know, you'll get a vase that actually looks like it's an

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attempted replica of one by a master. And then you'll get this stuff that also turns up in a funerary context, we assume. Part of the problem is we don't know where a lot of the stuff comes from, because it's all looted. So we don't know whether it was looted from the you know, *Sanctum Sanctorum* of the center of the main temple or whether it came from outlying structures, because, you know, it kind of all ends up on the black market and you know we have very little provenience on it, except for the chemistry of that work that Dorie has been doing, along with Ron Bishop, on re-proveniencing ceramics because of clay chemistry.

So anyway in the midst of all of this we get this phenomenon of pseudoglyphs, and Dorie has written extensively about it, and she was the one who first turned me onto it, and we had a lot of conversations about it. And this stuff looks like it's been painted by people who don't really understand the script but who are just copying it, and they're jumbling it up or they're making up glyphs that don't mean anything, you know. And then we question ourselves about "who are we to say that these glyphs don't mean anything, when you know, we're hardly literate ourselves really. We're just getting there." And so who are these people in terms of their ranking in society? They're probably not illiterate peasants or they wouldn't have access to the tradition in the first place, but are they sort of illiterate elites? Are they children of elites that just don't really understand this stuff? So I kind of leave that question right there, that there are some edges to it all that make it look like there were people who were participating in kind of a penumbra of the tradition who had some literacy but not a lot. But I think to sum it all up, the script was by, of and for the elite.

Now as far as the types of things they wrote about, we can only guess at what they might've written about that was on perishable materials. We've got the surviving codices, which are almanacs, but if they had that capability to put almanacs on screen fold bark paper, then they could've put history on it. They could've put magical practices and curing information. I mean you know, they could've kept laundry lists if they wanted to. And you know, one thinks well, they probably didn't, but we don't know. But I'm sure there's a tremendous amount of stuff that would have been put on perishable materials that we have no knowledge of, that they could well have written using the scripts.

Q: The Egyptians kept all kinds of accounts and lists and wrote letters and everything and that's entirely on the perishable materials.

Barbara Macleod: Right. That's right.

Q: And you don't find any of that on the tomb walls.

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Barbara Macleod: No you don't. So it definitely opens the door to the possibility that the Maya did all kinds of things with the script. And I have suspected as much just by the way the script is structured. And this kind of gets into the whole issue of the spelling rules, and I don't know if I want to talk too much about the spelling rules 'cause they're such a can of worms. But to me, what I have come to understand about the spelling rules makes it clear that this script was designed to cover a very, very wide range of language, not just the kind of stuff they talked about on the monuments or on the pots. That it was there to cover first, second and third person, singular and plural. They designed it with those kinds of things in mind. It was there to cover the entire grammatical system. And it was there to cover all of the suffixes that go on all of these roots. And so I would say we haven't cracked that one yet. But I think it definitely leads us in the direction of the assumption that they could've written about all kinds of things. They could've written love and hate letters, and you know, curing rituals and you know, secret potions and maybe even laundry lists.

Q: What do you see as the future of the decipherment now? What do you see happening in the next 20 years? Where is it going? Is it winding down? Is it opening up? Where are we at with it?

Barbara Macleod: I don't know how to answer that question when something like San Bartolo comes along. I mean even though it doesn't really contain much in the way of scripts, it has just kinda blown the lid off our understanding of the iconography. And you think that if something like that can be hidden in plain sight for so long, that what else it out there?

I think that we are gonna to continue to make major discoveries. I think there's no question that there are going to be other murals like that. We may find murals that have detailed hieroglyphic texts from the Preclassic. I wouldn't be surprised. I wouldn't be surprised at anything at this point.

I would say that in terms of the march of decipherment that I fear that we may be winding down in the sense that we've gone through the golden era. You know, the last several decades have been the period during which things have just cracked and each new discovery contributes to the body of discovery and escalates the process. You know, we've been watching that happen and it's been just a great privilege to participate in it. So it's hard for me to see that it's going to continue on that level. But it's certainly going to continue to be tweaked for a long time to come and I think that the grammatical and syntactic approach to decipherment is going to continue to crack loose some of the more recalcitrant signs. I mean there still are a bunch of undeciphered signs out there, and one

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of the reasons why is that they're rare. So the more examples of them that we find through future discoveries, the easier it becomes to figure them out. They're used in more esoteric contexts and we don't understand those contexts yet very well, and so when things like San Bartolo come to light which don't really contribute a lot text-wise but do contribute an enormous amount in terms of understanding the iconography and their religion, that the better handle we have on the iconography and the religion, the more tools we have to go after those contexts where those undeciphered signs reside. So you know, I think there's gonna be a lot coming out in the next 20 years.

Q: And one last question, what do you think is the importance of the San Bartolo discovery? What do you think that that has added?

Barbara Macleod: Yeah. The San Bartolo murals have ratified and underscored a lot of what we thought about Maya iconography, but they've also kind of blown the lid off of it and they've showed us that the scribes and the intellectuals of the Preclassic-- they already had something that was just absolutely fully formed. That we can't look at the Preclassic anymore as a pre-anything. It was its own thing! It was its own very rich and vital culture just rife with iconography and a religious system that was complete and whole and widespread. And that now we've gotten a good look into the heart of it and we see the continuity. We see the continuity with the Olmec, which is to me just amazing you know. To see the little Olmec Maize God pop up at San Bartolo was just wonderful because of the things that I've been working on recently. I think that it's cracked the wall to a certain extent on the Preclassic, which we tend to kind of look at as basically archaeological stuff rather than epigraphic and iconographic stuff. There've been a lot of exceptions to that, but San Bartolo has shown us what a rich, vital system it was in the Preclassic.

Q: Great. Thank you. Thank you.