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# SECRETS OF THE MAYA ... UNLOCKED!

Thanks to a Spanish bishop and a Russian linguist, among others, scientists are finally reading these ancient texts

By Lesley Bannatyne

It's 1959. A young Ian Graham packs supplies on a few mules - food, mosquito nets, a camera, a machete - and hires a group of Guatemalans to lead him along the ragged jungle paths they've cut to gather chicle for chewing gum. The team treks through the humid overgrowth until they reach a site his guides had spotted earlier. There, beaten by weather and overrun with vines, lie ruins of the ancient Maya, a civilization that collapsed a thousand years ago.

Graham's passion is searching for treasures like these: crumbling buildings, statues, and tall stone monuments called stelae (STEEL-uh), carved with hieroglyphic writings. Graham works quickly to record his finds with photos, maps, and drawings.

That was the beginning of what became Dr. Graham's life work. He has been documenting all the inscribed monuments of the Mayas and publishing them in books so they won't be lost. He's recorded 400 monuments for the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphics, which he directs for the Peabody Museum in Cambridge, Mass. The work is not finished.

"New monuments do appear quite often," Graham says in an interview in his museum office. It's stuffed with books, wide tables, and a darkroom.

Maya hieroglyphics make up the only writing system native to the New World. They are also the last great language mystery on the planet. Some 85 percent of the writing has been deciphered, but the rest is still a puzzle many are working to solve.

Maya dates and numbers were decoded in the 1800s. But the key to Maya writing did not begin to unfold until the 1950s.

The Maya lived in what is now Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize since at least 2600 BC. (See map below.) Their hieroglyphic texts were inscribed mostly from AD 250 to 900. This is called the "Classic Period" of the Maya. After that, the Maya mysteriously abandoned many of their major cities, and their civilization collapsed.



**MAYA RITUAL:** Ian Graham drew this picture of a stone carving in Chiapas, Mexico, of King Itzamnah Balam (left, holding a stylized torch) and his queen, Lady K'abal Xok. The date is Oct. 28, 709.  
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In the 1500s, Spanish conquistadors defeated the indigenous peoples of the region and destroyed much of their culture. Maya books were burned - only a handful survived. Roman Catholic missionaries followed. The story of cracking the Maya code begins with one of them, Bishop Diego de Landa, who asked an educated Maya about his language.

"Well, the wretched fellow did the best he could," Graham recounts. The bishop assumed the Mayas had an alphabet, like Spanish. "The bishop asked, 'How do you write 'bay' - the letter 'B' in Spanish - and the man drew a picture of a pair of feet.'" People in Europe thought the man was making a joke. What alphabet includes feet? It wasn't until 1952 that Russian linguist Yuri Knorosov realized that the symbols stood for sounds, not letters. The sound "bay," in spoken Maya, means "road." The glyph for "road" is a little path with footprints!



Thanks to the work of many other epigraphers (eh-PIG-ruh-fers, people who decipher and classify ancient inscriptions), we now know that Maya writing has two kinds of symbols. Some represent whole words. For example, a picture of a spotted animal with long teeth means "jaguar." Other symbols represent sounds, such as "la," "ka," or "ma." When put together - la-ka-ma - they form "lakam," which means "banner." We know that from a 16th-century Spanish/Maya dictionary. The Maya used around 500 glyphs. They are inscribed in columns that are read in pairs from left to right, top to bottom.

Another breakthrough happened in 1960. Russian-American architect Tatiana Proskouriakoff noticed that when the ancient Maya drew a picture of a man being dragged by his hair, they often drew similar glyphs nearby, like a caption for the picture. She identified the symbols for "was captured" - chu-ka-ja, or "chukaj." Ms. Proskouriakoff was eventually able to prove that glyph texts told stories of real events in Maya history.

This was exciting news for Maya experts. Up until then, "you had dates, but you couldn't tell what happened on that date," Graham explains.

Earlier scholars had decoded Maya calendars, astronomical information, and a numbering system that were all quite extraordinary in their accuracy. (One Maya calendar had 18 months of 20 days each - 360 days - followed by five "unlucky" days.) They believed the Maya were a peaceful people who spent most of their time star-gazing.

But newly deciphered texts began to tell of wars and human sacrifice. Rulers emerged as real people with names like "Fire-Eating Serpent," "Jaguar Mirror," and "Smoke Monkey." In the 1980s, Maya epigrapher Linda Schele popularized inscriptions that described bloodletting ceremonies. In these rituals, rulers shed their own blood onto paper made of bark. They burned the paper as an offering to ancestors and gods. They claimed to see visions in the smoke.



**THE TEMPLE OF FIVE LEVELS:** This 100-foot-tall Maya temple - built without using metal tools - is near Campeche, Mexico. The area was settled from 600 BC to AD 1500. More ancient Maya stone carvings are still being found.  
GERRY VOLGENAU/DETROIT FREE PRESS/AP/FILE

"Once people started to understand the verbs," says Barbara Fash, a research associate at the Peabody Museum, "the illustrations appeared more graphic."

Researchers learned that when the Maya went to war, "it was not a battle of bloodshed on the

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battleground," says Ms. Fash. "Instead, they took captives, brought them back, and had a ceremony in which they were killed." It was a way to proclaim victory in an age of no TV, radio, or photographs to verify events.

Today, with computers and books to help share information, and more and more glyphs decoded, our understanding of the Maya is changing again. "It's too bad all people know is that they went to battle, captured, and sacrificed," says Fash, "because that's only what rulers did - like [on] our war monuments. That's not the whole story." Modern researchers are looking at objects like pots, jewelry, even old garbage piles, to learn about everyday life. Fash is working on musical instruments, hoping the symbols painted or inscribed on them may contain instructions on how to play them or even fragments of songs.

### SO, YOU WANT TO GROW UP TO BE AN ANCIENT INSCRIPTION READER?

Marc Zender, a lecturer at Harvard, started decoding Mayan glyphs when he was 8. "That's the time you're interested in codes and writing secret messages to your friends," he says. "That's when I was bitten by the bug." Mr. Zender's mom brought him often to the Royal Ontario Museum, and he loved the ancient writings. He went from Egyptian to Aztec, and finally to Maya because "there was more left to do."

Stephen Houston, a professor at Brown University, agrees: "In Maya writing, new information is pouring in," he says. "There are 10,000 Maya inscriptions or texts. That number will grow. What's fun ... is that new texts always have the capacity to surprise you."

What does it take to be an epigrapher - someone who studies ancient writing? A knowledge of languages, math, anthropology, and history is useful. Interested students often train themselves by attending workshops and conferences, reading books, and working at archaeological sites.

Professor Houston says good epigraphers also have a natural ability. That may explain why many are so young (Houston was an "ancient" 19 when he began studying glyphs). "As a professor, I can teach people to read it [Maya text], but to be good at it is innate," he says. A photographic memory helps. So does an ability to see patterns. He loves the challenge of reading ancient text, he says. He loves solving the puzzle.



**GLYPHS:** The above symbol is a day sign for 'Ox Ok' (3 Ok), pronounced 'ohsh ohk,' part of a date inscription. The symbol below continues the date, roughly: 'It was the sixth moon, named the "skull moon."'



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