



## Breaking the Maya Code

*Michael D. Coe*

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## **Breaking the Maya Code** Michael D. Coe

Among the more exciting advances to be described are: the discovery of the specific Maya language and sophisticated grammar used by the ancient scribes on stone monuments and painted vases; archaeological explorations of tombs and buildings of the ancient founders of the great city of Copan, whose very existence had been predicted by epigraphers through glyphic decipherment; the realization that many small city-states were dominated by two rival giants, Tikal and Calakmul, through a potent combination of military conquest, diplomacy, and royal marriages.

## **Breaking the Maya Code Details**

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Author : Michael D. Coe

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# From Reader Review *Breaking the Maya Code* for online ebook

## Hancock says

This is a very interesting book. If I was the sort of person who needs to classify everything I would have a hard time classifying this book. It's a bit autobiographical, it is, of course, the story of the decipherment of Mayan script, also included are stories about about other great decipherments, especially the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics , and it's a bit of Hollywood tell-all tale. Dr. Coe rarely passes an opportunity to rip into the influential archaeologist, ethnohistorian, and epigrapher Sir John Eric Sidney Thompson, known throughout the book simply as Eric Thompson.

If you are wondering, as I did when I started this book, what is an epigrapher, I can direct you to the excellent glossary at the back of the book. If your knowledge of archaeology, epigraphy, and linguistics is casual, as is mine, then you will find the glossary to be of great value.

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## Thomas says

This book fulfils what its title promises: it details how the maya glyphs were deciphered and the struggle it took the many Mayanists to get there. If you are looking for a detailed introduction to a Classical (or living) Maya language, this is not your book. Nor will you find all the glyphs that have been deciphered so far with all their variants. No, what you do get is more to the core and possibly more interesting: an introduction to how the system worked and how it was suited to its needs.

We get a comparative chapter on other ancient writing systems, with special attention to Egyptian hieroglyphs and their decipherment in the 19th century, as well as an introduction to the Maya lifestyle. This is followed by the occasional good ideas and many more bad ideas that hindered decipherment. Many other reviewers seem to think that Coe is too severe on Thompson's role in playing down inventive ideas in the 20th century, but it seems the reason why Coe is so negative towards him is well grounded. After all, it is not uncommon in different scholarly and scientific branches to have people who are so convinced of their own right that, even in the face of irrefutable proof, they will not give in but instead become more vehement in their self-righteousness. An excellent example of another field is for instance how Einstein was against the mere idea of the Big Bang, now well-accepted, because it did not fit in with his own theories. It took him many years to wrap his head around it (all the while discrediting the proponents of that theory) until he adapted his own brain stuff.

So, to be short, this book that had been on my want-to-read list, was a really engaging semi-autobiographical book that was informative, fun, and often very sassy. Also makes me want to become a Mayanist, but I'm already a Sinologist :)

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## Scott says

*Breaking the Maya Code* is not so much about deciphering the Mayan script as it is about the adventurers, divines, scholars, librarians, insurance salesmen, and students who contributed to -- and often befuddled -- our understanding of Mayan epigraphy for over four centuries.

Before actually discussing how the Mayan code has been recently deciphered, Coe indulges himself in nearly

two-hundred pages of scholarly anecdotes, brief biography, and sometimes curious, though often pointless trivia as he traces in great detail how, in spite of centuries of effort, the writing on the monuments of Chichen Itza, Copan, and Palenque was misunderstood or intentionally disregarded by feuding scholars. With perfect hindsight, Coe waspishly criticizes predecessors and colleagues whose attempts at decipherment either failed or whose opinions and renown in academia hindered others from making progress toward understanding the true nature of the glyphs. With great embellishment, he heaps praise on the work of the "Young Turks" who have finally adopted phonetic principals to crack the code.

What results is Coe's book of remembrance, his memoirs of fifty years in some of the more privileged corners of academia (he never fails to mention he took his degrees from Harvard and taught at Yale) spent trying to make sense not only of the "Lords of the Forest" but also of the gods, men, and monsters in the university.

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## **Bob Newman says**

Ter-glyph-ic !

Having worked in academia for a number of years, Coe's story of overbearing professors belittling opposing views on a personal level, of scholars unwilling to grant even the slightest kudos to people who had made major discoveries, of jealousies galore, of careers threatened for failing to toe the line, was not surprising to me. It took several centuries to break the Maya system of writing. After any number of cockeyed theories had been mooted, it was a Russian scholar, who had never been out of the USSR, who realized how the system worked. Before him, a number of people approached the same answer---even Benjamin Whorf, a famous American linguist got into the act--- but were pooh-poohed and disparaged by other, more powerful scholars. Coe weaves a most interesting story, combined with numerous pictures, maps, and photographs, of how the Mayan glyphs were finally read. The problem was that, for some reason, most epigraphers did not connect the writing with the spoken Mayan languages of Mesoamerica though the example of how Egyptian "hieroglyphic" writing was read by Champollion (and others) who knew Coptic, was available to all. The Rosetta Stone is famously known to have aided the French scholar, but Spanish Bishop Landa's work of the 16th century, which could have performed a similar function, was long ignored. Maya writing was neither alphabetic or completely logographic, but a combination of both. Coe's book tells of the various characters and scholars who tried to break the code, who went down any number of wrong roads, and fought among themselves. After the main debate was settled, young scholars deciphered increasing numbers of glyphs, a kind of fascinating academic process which seldom reaches publication especially in such readable style. It's an 'archaeological saga' for sure. Coe also connects Maya writing to Maya history, to the civilization that flourished in the forests of Central America and Yucatan for many centuries, and to other systems of writing in the world, Egyptian, Hittite, Chinese, etc. All in all, it is a fascinating, well-written study that will hold your attention. No terms are used without explanation. Though obviously an academic subject, anyone can read this story of how the work of many individuals finally opened Maya (elite) history to the rest of the world.

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## **Matt says**

This book is great. The Mayan glyphs are so mysterious, so artistic. The author walks through the history of the attempts to decipher Mayan glyphs, spanning 150 years. It is a no holds barred, in your face primer on the basics of written language, yet not so technical that you lose interest. The storyline is interesting as Michael Coe introduces the reader to the great minds (and not so great minds) and their contributions to the decipherment. All along the way, the ancient Maya are brought to life as their written statements shed light into their philosophy, astronomy, calendrics, aggressions and rituals.

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## **Erik Graff says**

Although reluctant to be a first world tourist in a third world area, my wife Linda eventually got me to go down to Quintana Roo in the NE Yucatan with her. Ultimately, I made three trips, all of them to the area midway between Cancun and Belize, preparing for them each time by reading up on the region and its original inhabitants, the Maya.

While Linda preferred the beach, I preferred exploring the ruins which are abundant in the area. To do so I befriended the locals, the descendants of the Maya, particularly the children, asking them where interesting things were. Then, following the paths of generations of little kids, I would go into the jungle to the places the tourists never venture, the places without roads. There, among other things, I found a cave with an island in it, and many square limestone structures, open on their sides, ranging in size from buildings a dozen feet tall to stupas the height of one's chest. And, yes, of course, I also went to Tulum and Xelha and Coba and other more touristic sites, pretty much covering the coast from Cancun to the southern border with Belize, much of it on foot.

Now, three trips and dozens of books into the matter, I'm an amateur student of the Maya, a culture at once so distant from ours and so close. The conquest of it only happened 400-500 years ago. The paint on some of the ruins, compared to those of ancient Greece or Rome, is still fresh.

One of the better introductory works on the Maya that I read was Coe's book by that title. Published in 1966, it still looked at Mayan civilization as a mystery. We could read their numerations, but not their language at that time. This book, published in 1992, tells a very different and much more hopeful story, the written Mayan language having been substantially deciphered in the intervening years.

Breaking the Maya Code is at once a history of the study of Mayan civilization and an explanation as to how their written language worked--and why we took so very long to come around to understanding it. The historical part of the book is very accessible, almost as exciting as a good mystery. The linguistic part of the book tends to get technical, though the author does adequately explain things for the layperson.

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## **Areli Vázquez says**

I really like that the book is dedicated to Knorosov:

"TO THE MEMORY OF YURI VALENTINOVICH KNOROSOV aj bobat, aj miatz, etail".

Coe's book is a very interesting one about the story of the decipherment of Mayan script. I did not even know that the Mayas had a system of writing that represented their spoken language. And due to Knorosov work

now we can read Mayan stelas, inscriptions, pottery, codices.

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## **Sara says**

Excellent and interesting. At the time I read this, I was all set to learn Mayan hieroglyphs. Then I realized that I would have to learn Mayan. Eesh. Chan Balam - Sky Jaguar. That's about as far as I got in my notebook I was keeping. Then I adopted an iguana and suddenly got very, very busy. The book however - it was great. Love reading about ancient languages and translations of ancient scripts.

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## **Helmut says**

### **Aus den Memoiren des Forschers Coe**

Die süd- und mittelamerikanischen präkolumbischen Kulturen haben mich schon als Kind fasziniert; ich malte gern Maya-Schriftzeichen ab, war ein Azteken-Fan und träumte von versunkenen Dschungelstädten voller geheimnisvoller Stelen. Vielen ging es wohl so, und Leute wie wir werden dann natürlich von einem Buch, das einen so vielversprechenden Namen trägt, magisch angezogen.

Und wie das dann sehr oft so ist: Die Magie ist schnell verflogen. Coe beschreibt in seinem Buch zu gefühlten 90% die Lebensläufe der wichtigsten Forscher auf dem Gebiet der Schriftentschlüsselung. Ist diese biografische Komponente zu Beginn noch einigermaßen erträglich, so übersprang ich ab der Mitte bis zum Ende ganze Passagen - mich interessiert, wenn ich so ein Buch beginne, doch nicht die Kindheit von amerikanischen Ethnologen, sondern die Maya und ihre Schrift! Davon finde ich persönlich viel zu wenig in diesem Buch. Ein paar Kapitel sind für mich als studierten Linguisten sehr interessant, wenn es um Morphologie, Phonetik und andere Sprachstrukturen geht; doch das fühlt sich mehr wie Randnotizen an in einem geschichtlichen Abriss der Maya-Forschung, nicht der Maya selbst.

Coe spart nicht mit Vorwürfen und Kritik an anderen Forschungsrichtungen, sein Lieblingsbiss geht gegen die Archäologen, die die Maya erforschen, ohne eine Maya-Sprache zu sprechen. Diesen Biss kann man leicht zurückgeben - Coe schreibt hier ein Buch über die Maya, ohne sie wirklich vorzustellen. Dazu kommt eine etwas sehr prosaische Übersetzung, in der man oft erkennt, was der Autor originalsprachlich eigentlich sagen wollte, bevor der Übersetzer es verwurstet hat.

Viel zu wenige Illustrationen, keine zusammenhängende Erklärung, wie die Maya-Schriftsymbole nun aufgebaut sind, wenig Einblick in die Kultur selbst. Kann man lesen, muss man nicht. Ich halte weiter Ausschau nach interessanteren Büchern zu den Maya.

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## **Jacques Coulardeau says**

REVOLUTION AMONG MAYANISTS  
FROM SIR ERIC (THOMPSON) TO REAL EPIGRAPHY  
STRAIGHT FROM THE MOUTH OF A DIRECT WITNESS

Sir Eric (Thompson) was knighted by the Queen of England in 1975, just before his passing away, to thank him for all he had done in the field of Maya research. But what on earth had he done?

He had blocked for at least forty years all research about Maya writing because for him all these signs and carvings and paintings and decorations in stone, in paint, on walls, on pots, on plates, on bark-paper, all those monuments in the jungle were not writing, were not the written form of an oral language that had been in existence for thousands of years, but was the aesthetic beautiful artistic expression of no scribes but visionary shamans of some kind able to see beyond the surface of things and able to express directly the depth and beauty of the soul of the shamans, of the artists, of the Maya people. It was decreed by this Sir Eric (Thompson) that apart from the mathematical glyphs with numbers and long count, short count or whatever, all the rest was in no way linguistic and the dates and mathematical symbols were only the sign of the absolute addiction of the Maya to numbers, mathematics, time, and other figments of their somewhat troubled imagination during the long bouts of absolute drunkenness (drunken coma?) they enjoyed by enematic injections. They might even be astrologers, you know, these people who are predicting your future from the stars, telling you your horoscope in two sentences for the day, the week, the month, the years to come, even your life, though then they need a crystal ball or a pack of tarots cards. And mind you for them the planet Venus is supreme, male and vindictive in HIS request for blood. In other words, they were – and still are – barbarians according to these intellectuals who must be attracted to the subject by the scent of blood.

The damage was so deep that it took twenty years for the epigraphers, ethnographers, archaeologists, and linguists, plus a myriad of other scientists or undergraduate and graduate students to finally recognize the truth that was first said and published in 1952 by a Soviet linguist in Leningrad, Yuri Knorozov, the truth that Maya writing was comparable to Egyptian hieroglyphs: on the basis of some logographs (glyphs that represented an object, an animal, a person or a god, and at times something more abstract, like the sun, the moon, sunrise and sunset) that have kept their recognizable forms, the writing system developed as a phonetic system whose architecture was that of a syllabary. And that had been suggested in the 16th century by Landa, the monk and later on a bishop who had thousands of Maya books burnt up in an autodafe.

We are luckily far beyond this sorry phase of the forty years of feudal and aristocratic dictatorship from one single man, Sir Eric (Thompson). Kukulkan, please, bless the child! If that had not happened the Maya might have been able to resist against the last episode of genocide and ethnocide they had to suffer in Guatemala at the end of the 20th century, not to mention the systematic segregation they are the victims of everywhere in Mesoamerica since they pretend to speak Maya languages, they consider Spanish as a second language, and they identify to Christianity because in a way Jesus Christ is Quetzalcoatl, aka Kukulkan. D.H. Lawrence said that in the 1920s with his famous novel *The Plumed Serpent*, (1926). Let's hope this resurrection, restoration, renaissance of an ethnocided, genocided and ecocided culture will bring La Malinche back into the light, the interpreter of Hernán Cortés who has been diabolized and Satanized by the Mexicans.

You will find here the long study on Michael D. Coe's essential book on the saga of how Maya script was finally deciphered, and Coe knows what he is speaking of since he was a direct witness of the whole dys-adventure because he managed to get a modest position in academia in Thompson's time and he remained modest in his suggestions that could not, had not to appear like a challenge. He informed the "Master" about Yuri Knorozov, he did his own thing under the table, and he let the "Master" exorcize the communist devil from Leningrad. And that lasted from 1952 to 1975. That was the Cold War in academia. That was, plain and simple, intellectual academic McCarthyism. Really God, please, Kukulkan, pretty please, Quetzalcoatl, with sugar on top, do bless the child and try to save us from the deeply rooted anti-communistic prejudices that reign in the USA so powerful that it makes everyone blind, like some onanistic sin of the past, according to absolute experts about it, viz. priests of any affiliation and confession, who happened to speak of it between two episodes of child molesting.

Enjoy that descent into hell, the hell of the good fundamentalist and sectarian – we would have said Stalinist

in my days – academic totalitarianism of the “intellectual elite” of a nation, of the Western world in days of globalization.

Dr. Jacques COULARDEAU

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### **Jim says**

Michael D. Coe's **Breaking the Maya Code: Third Edition** is about a conflict between the diggers and the linguists. When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, he had his scholar Champollion with him. It was not too many years after the discovery of the Rosetta Stone during that expedition that Champollion had figured out how to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs.

There was a Rosetta Stone for Mayan hieroglyphs as well -- one dating all the way back to 1566. It was Bishop Diego de Landa's book **Relacion de los cosas de Yucatan**, which included the bishop's own study of the language. (Darn nice of him, since he was the man responsible for burning so many of the Maya condexes at Mani years earlier.)

What prevented the glyphs from being translated was that the diggers -- the archaeologists, rather than the linguists -- were in control. One man, Sir J. Eric S. Thompson had, for four decades, insisted that the glyphs didn't mean anything. It was not until Thompson died in 1975 that the glyphs yielded up their meaning. Oddly, the impetus came not from America, but from two Russians, Tatiana Proskouriakoff and Yuri Valentinovich Knorozov.

When I first visited Yucatan in 1975, I believed Thompson that the thousands of glyphs were not important. (For all his renown, Thompson never learned any dialect of Mayan.) It was the linguists who gave the Maya a history, complete with names, dates, and events.

Coe's book is actually exciting. It is a detective story about how to overcome stodgy entrenched interests.

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### **Roger Hernandez says**

Perhaps one of the best books I've read in many years. Breaking the Maya Code was as epic as deciphering the Egyptian Hieroglyphs in the 19th century. The Maya were the only civilization in the Americas with a complete writing system. This book discusses all of the facets of deciphering Mayan script and its contemporary role in Maya communities.

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### **Elizabeth K. says**

Well, this certainly had a lot of content. I sought this out after reading the recent book about the Stephens and Catherwood expeditions.

Overall, I enjoyed it, although my impression of it perhaps suffered a little because it wasn't exactly what I was looking for.



Roughly the first half covers the major personalities in Mayan studies and the history of the field. It was interesting, and it set the stage, and it went into more detail than I was prepared for. Some of it had a ... weird? ... tone because the author himself is a Mayan scholar, and knows (or knew) the more recent folks working in this area, and it felt like he was trying to say nice things about the individuals but for me, seeing as I don't know these people and don't care what they think of me, it felt wedged in. Or maybe an editor told him "oh, for human interest, you should add some tidbits that show the personalities of these people" and then he randomly stuck in odd descriptors that ended up feeling really out of context (and in addition to the nice things, some of them were rather salty, which seemed even stranger). The main takeaway from this section is important, however, which is that there were a lot of incorrect assumptions about the Mayan writing that shifted the focus away from avenues of inquiry that might have produced better results sooner -- namely that Mayan civilization wasn't advanced enough to develop a truly coherent writing system (wrong), that the written language was entirely symbolic and not related to spoken Mayan, variations of which are still spoken by actual people (wrong), and that the writing was only used to express dates and calendar calculations (there are a lot of dates, but still wrong).

The second part of the book got more into what was actually happening as researchers started to make more progress with the Mayan writing. The book was impressively successful at broad-stroking the general idea of the thing -- how you (if you are a linguist) can suss out the relationship between sounds and symbols. For the curious, the signs can act as either outright symbols of a thing (a picture of a jaguar is a jaguar) but they can also be used as phonetic markers so you can use them to spell out any word. Or any word that a Mayan person wanted to carve into a lintel or paint on ceramics.

As interesting as all of that was, I suspect it's the kind of thing where Coe isn't that used to explaining it to beginners, and this stuff probably seems very obvious to him. What was really missing, for me, and again, this might not have been his goal at all, was a deep explanation of how the glyphs work visually. They're incredibly hard to suss out for a person outside of that tradition. It was extremely challenging to match up the Mayan images with the explanations. And of course, you have a body of writing that spanned centuries, ranging over a large geographic area, and so there are a lot of differences from example to example and it was utterly unclear which threads of commonality I was supposed to be looking at. What I wanted was more of a visual history of the writing itself. (As an example, one of them is supposedly the image of a frog, and I'm staring at this thing and I can't see a frog -- is it a frog in profile? A birds-eye view? Is that squiggle a leg? A hat? WHAT IS THIS?)

But it definitely succeeded in showing the complexity of understanding Mayan writing and makes a real impression of how dedicated and smart and determined folks had to be to make progress.

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## **Rob says**

A wonderful book about the history of decipherment of the Mayan glyphs. It is also a cautionary tale of how the strength of personality of a single scientist can stymie an entire field of study. I enjoyed learning about the late Linda Schele, a native Tennessean and an artist by trade, was a key member of the group that cracked open the barrier to understanding these ancient people as human beings.

It is a challenging book and one I will have to read again to better grasp the content. Still, it is well worth the effort!

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## **Dave says**

I was really excited to read this book; as a linguistics dork this sounded great. The pseudo-anthropologist in me felt his heart go pitter-pat. But the book itself is so incredibly tedious in tone that I quickly lost enthusiasm. Praise for certain academics and descriptions of their quirks as people; crotchety indictments of others, along with descriptions of their quirks as people. Shut up and tell me about the role of phonetics in the deciphering of the script already! Sheesh.

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