

DECIPHERING THE MAYA GLYPHS

by Wim Coleman and Pat Perrin

The story of how Maya¹ glyphs were deciphered is an epic tale—ranging from 16th-century bonfires to the flames of a 20th-century war ... and beyond.

The Maya culture was at its height about 800 A.D., but by 900 many of their cities had been abandoned. On Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, these people had built magnificent pyramids and temples that still towered above the jungles when the Spanish arrived. They had developed a complicated calendar and an excellent numerical system. And for about 2000 years, they had kept written records of their civilization.

In *The Maya*, scholar Michael D. Coe describes the Maya books. The pages were long strips of bark paper, folded like screens. Highly respected scribes wrote and illustrated them, using brushes dipped in red or black ink. According to images on pottery, these books—called codices—had jaguar-skin covers.

The Maya wrote with symbols called glyphs (a bit like Egyptian hieroglyphics). They carved information into the buildings they created, and they wrote thousands of codices—books containing prophecies, songs, rituals, genealogies, and also dealing with history and science.

When the Spanish reached the Yucatan, a lot of those books were still left in the abandoned ruins. Most of them would soon be deliberately destroyed.

THE GREAT BONFIRES

A few years after the Spanish conquest of the Yucatan peninsula, a young Spanish priest asked to be sent to the New World as a missionary. When Diego de Landa arrived in 1549, the Yucatec Maya Indians were suffering from starvation, disease, and mistreatment by some Spanish authorities. Landa did everything he could think of to help them—which led to mistakes and disasters.

Landa came to love the Maya people, and he was determined to convert them to Christianity. Horrified by their history of human sacrifice, he decided to get rid of all connections to that pagan past. He later explained to Spanish authorities that the codices “had nothing in which there was not superstition and lies of the devil”—a pretty nervy assumption, since he couldn't read them. He added, “we burned them all.”

Landa also expressed surprise that the Indians got so upset about what he was doing. According to some accounts, 157 Indians who resisted were killed in his clean-up process.

LIBRARIES LOST AND NOTES FOUND

Some Maya priests tried to save their books by fleeing into the jungle with them. But the materials didn't hold up well in the wet, humid Yucatan climate, and those eventually deteriorated and disappeared. Only four codices survive today.

¹ Coe and other scholars we've read use the word “Mayan” only as the name of the language, and use “Maya” as singular and plural nouns and as an adjective. We've followed that style. On the other hand, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* uses “Mayan” as a general adjective, and you'll see it that way in other resources, too.

So the Maya books had disappeared, leaving those who wanted to study the culture very little to work with. Fortunately, some glyphs were carved into the nonflammable stone of buildings and monuments. But many prominent Scholars believed that those marks were religious symbols, not actual writing.

In 1862, more than three hundred years after the book burning, an Abbé in Madrid was searching through a collection of old materials about the Americas. He came across a manuscript called *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (Account of the Affairs of Yucatan)—written by Diego de Landa himself.

It seems that Landa's treatment of the Indians had been thought harsh by some officials in Spain. He had been called back to defend his actions (apparently successfully, since he was made a bishop and sent back to the Yucatan). In his defense, Landa gathered up his notes and wrote a long essay on Maya life. The manuscript that the Abbé found was a copy of Landa's original, and probably incomplete. But it gave details about the Maya calendar, the number system, and people's everyday lives. And it included notes on the glyphs.

Even though Landa had destroyed all the Maya books he could find, he had tried to learn their writing system. Convinced that the glyphs were an alphabet, Landa enlisted an Indian—probably a Maya nobleman—to help him. According to Coe in *Breaking the Maya Code*, Landa's method was something like this: He pronounced a Spanish letter, then asked his helper to point out the matching glyph. Landa then sketched each glyph and wrote the letter beneath it.

So could people now read what the ancient Maya had written?

Unfortunately, no. Landa's chart had three symbols for the letter "A," two symbols for "B," and other notes that didn't make sense. The chart didn't help decipher anything, and many scholars went back to thinking of the glyphs as symbols for ideas, not for words.

ONCE MORE—INTO THE FLAMES

Nearly another hundred years went by. During World War II, a young Russian named Yuri Valentinovich Knorosov entered Berlin with the Red Army. According to Coe, when Knorosov saw the German National Library on fire, he snatched *one* book from the flames. It was—incredibly—a complete reproduction of three Maya codices.

After the war, Knorosov took the book home with him. He continued his studies—which included ancient Egyptian, Japanese, Arabic, Chinese, and Indian writing systems—at Moscow University. A few years later, a professor challenged him to solve the Maya code.

Even though he'd never been on a Maya site, Knorosov came up with an idea that no one else had thought of. First, he re-imagined what must have gone on between Landa and his Maya aide: Landa was speaking a Spanish letter, and asking his Indian helper what that equaled in Mayan. But since the Maya didn't *have* an alphabet, Knorosov said, the Indian didn't even know what a letter was. So he got as close as he could to what Landa was saying. He pointed to images representing words that had that sound *in* them.

In 1952, Knorosov published his ideas. A lot of the long-time scholars of the language went into denial, but it eventually became clear that Knorosov was right. The glyphs stood for syllables, and occasionally for words. (Researchers had already realized that some were numbers.)

So, four hundred years after the books were burned, scholars could finally unravel ancient Maya texts. Interpretation of the glyphs is still in process, but at last it can be done.

SOURCES:

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internet:

“Landa, Diego de” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* online.

David Stuart, “The Maya Finally Speak: Decoding the Glyphs Unlocked Secrets of a Mighty Civilization” in *Discovering Archaeology*, November/December 1999, <<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/maya/speak.htm>>

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