

Hieroglyphics Hold Secrets of Mayan Civilization

By ROBERT MUSEL
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This is the home of Dr. J. Eric S. Thompson, recently of the Carnegie Institution in Washington who (with other archeologists elsewhere) is engaged in a feat of detection infinitely more difficult than ever was dreamed by the master-sleuths of fiction.

Dr. Thompson is trying to decipher the hieroglyphic writings left behind by the Maya people who flourished in the forest of Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico from about 200 A.D. to 900 A.D. and then mysteriously vanished into obscurity.

The 16th Century found the remnants of the Maya and were the first to marvel at the mighty ruins of the only civilization in history that came into being in a tropical forest.

Centuries later came the scientists such as Dr. Thompson and they took up the challenge of the Maya language as it has come down to us in the hieroglyphic carvings of a thousand or so monuments and in the first "books" written on the American continent.

So far the language remains mostly a mystery although

over the years the Maya system of numbering and dating has become clearer.

They had, these frugal people who lived in thatched huts in the shadows of their great stone cathedrals, an obsession with time.

But the vital clue to what really happened to the Mayan nation of 3,000,000 somewhere about 900 A.D. when its temples began to fall into decay and its civilization into disarray eludes the "detectives."

There is always the thought that it may be locked somewhere in the stone carvings or in the three existing books

found among the stone ruins built on a scale rivalling many of the shrines and pyramids of ancient Egypt.

No Alphabet
Apparently they did not have an alphabet. Thus there will never be a Maya "rosetta stone."

This was a slab carved in Egyptian hieroglyphics with a translation in Greek which made it comparatively easy for scientists to solve the written language of the Pharaohs.

Obviously the priest ruler of a Maya city knew what he wanted when he ordered his scribes or sculptors to re-

cord certain events. But it is evident the artists had the widest license in interpreting his instructions in stone or paint.

Dr. Thompson said he knew of one glyph which had been "written" down at least 80 different ways!

So in a sense he and other Maya experts are faced with the problem of reading the mind of a priest ruler as a Maya artist dead 1000 years or more.

It is an enigma so fascinating and the scientific kudus for translating the language will be so great that the

Russians turned over one of their electronic computers to Prof. Yuro Knorozov in the hope he would beat Dr. Thompson and the rest of the world to a final solution.

In due course Prof. Knorozov triumphantly announced: "The Marxist-Leninist approach has succeeded in deciphering the glyphs."

Later on he referred to Dr. Thompson, the distinguished author of "Maya Archaeologist," and his colleagues of Carnegie as "lackers of American imperialism."

decipher many of the glyphs," Dr. Thompson smiled. "Actually he also used those translations we have managed to get. When the fanfare faded—so did Prof. Knorozov."

Dr. Thompson, a youthful 64 (these scientist veterans of the disease-ridden Central American jungles must be a sturdy lot—one of them was killed in a traffic accident in Paris at the age of 109 when he turned to look at a pretty girl) put the problem this way:

"The Maya used Rebus writing. If you want to write 'I see Aunt Peg' in Rebus

your draw a picture of an eye, some waves, an ant and a peg. If the Mayas were consistent about it we might get somewhere but consider this example:

Rebus Writing
"The word for 'count' is XOC (pronounced shock). XOC also means a mythical shark who lives in the skies. To present the word 'count' the Mayans at first drew the head of this shark. But drawing a shark's head every time they wanted the word count must have become a nuisance. So they apparently figured something along these lines: A shark lives in water. Water is green and precious. Jade, our most valuable possession, is also green and precious.

"So a jade bead became the sign for 'count!'"

Where the decipherers have had most success is in the Mayan fascination with time and dates. Bishop Diego de Landa who wrote a history of Yucatan in 1560 provided invaluable background here for he found some descendants of the Mayas who helped him translate glyphs relating to their astonishing calendar.

Dr. Thompson said this records specific dates back more than 90,000,000 years. It is more accurate in spacing out a century than even our own Gregorian calendar. In 1,000 years of studying the revolutions of Venus the Mayas made an error of only one day.

They studied the heavenly bodies because they believed history always repeated itself and if they could discover when tragedies had taken place they could avert them by propitiating the Gods with sacrifice and penance when they were due to happen again.

Tell Little

Other than dates and astronomical information very little has been drawn from the glyphs and the three surviving books—brought back during the Spanish conquest and deposited in Dresden, Madrid and Paris.

Dr. Thompson said "so far as we know" the monuments and altar carvings deal only with the end of regular periods of time—five, ten or 20 years—and contain astronomical and calendrical calculations and information about the Gods.

The three books (bark beaten a kind of thick paper) are almanacs of sorts giving advice on which days are good for health or sowing crops or for hunting. Some scientists think the prophecies might reveal historical data because the Mayas believed the future is only a return of what occurred in the past.

Popular scientists like to theorize that the end of the Maya civilization came suddenly and the people dispersed. Dr. Thompson does not believe this. The Mayas (who probably reached Central America about 2,000 B.C. from Asia) may have revolted against their priests who had taken up the cult of the planet Venus instead of maintaining the good graces of the old gods of corn and the soil.

Defaced Temples

They wrecked or defaced many of the great temples and massacred the priest-rulers. Then they dispersed into the forests to their small communities of thatched huts. They were decimated centuries later, in Dr. Thompson's view, by disease from the old world.

"The Mayans excelled in the impractical," Dr. Thompson said, "but they failed in the practical. They charted the heavens yet they failed to grasp the principles of the wheel. They counted in millions but they never learned to weigh a sack of corn."

The Mayans made rubber-soled sandals and rubber-proofed rain capes. They were the first to cultivate cocoa, the papaya, the avocado pear. They had a curious idea of beauty. They deformed their heads by elongating the crown. A large nose, drooping lower lip and slightly receding chin were other beauty marks.

In warfare they used "hornet bombs"—they threw hornets nests at the enemy.

Schools Benefit From Telephone Marathon

Portland — (UPI) — A marathon telephone solicitation brought pledges of \$15,280 for Oregon's 10 private colleges and universities from alumni.

The two-night campaign wound up Tuesday night. Chairman Jerry Whipple, assistant to the president of Willamette University, said 219 volunteer callers rang up 3,846 alumni and that more than half of those contacted said they would contribute.

Schools to share in the fund are Willamette, Cascade, George Fox, Lewis and Clark, Linfield, Marylhurst, Mt. Angel, Pacific, Reed and Portland.

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