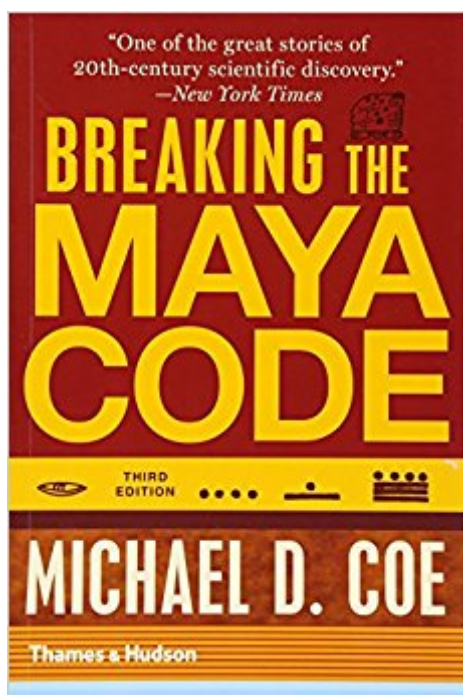


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Breaking The Maya Code (Third Edition)



Synopsis

The inside story of one of the great intellectual breakthroughs of our time—the first great decipherment of an ancient script—now revised and updated. In the past dozen years, Maya decipherment has made great strides, in part due to the Internet, which has made possible the truly international scope of hieroglyphic scholarship: glyphic experts can be found not only in North America, Mexico, Guatemala, and western Europe but also in Russia and the countries of eastern Europe. The third edition of this classic book takes up the thorny question of when and where the Maya script first appeared in the archaeological record, and describes efforts to decipher its meaning on the extremely early murals of San Bartolo. It includes iconographic and epigraphic investigations into how the Classic Maya perceived and recorded the human senses, a previously unknown realm of ancient Maya thought and perception. There is now compelling documentary and historical evidence bearing on the question of why and how the “breaking of the Maya code” was the achievement of Yuri V. Knorosov—a Soviet citizen totally isolated behind the Iron Curtain—and not of the leading Maya scholar of his day, Sir Eric Thompson. What does it take to make such a breakthrough, with a script of such complexity as the Maya? We now have some answers, as Michael Coe demonstrates here. 112 black-and-white illustrations

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Customer Reviews

The decipherment of the Maya script was, Coe states, "one of the most exciting intellectual adventures of our age, on a par with the exploration of space and the discovery of the genetic code." He presents the story eloquently and in detail, with many illustrations of the mysterious Maya

inscriptions and the people who tried to decipher them. Most of the credit, he says, goes to the late Yuri V. Knorosov of the Russian Institute of Ethnography, but many others participated. They did not always agree, and some of them went up blind alleys. Coe--emeritus professor of anthropology at Yale University--vividly describes the battles, missteps and successes. What is now established, he writes, is that "the Maya writing system is a mix of logograms and syllabic signs; with the latter, they could and often did write words purely phonetically." Coe concludes with a swipe at "dirt archaeologists" who believe the decipherment of Maya writing "is not worthy of notice." According to them, he asserts, "the Maya inscriptions are 'epiphenomenal,' a ten-penny word meaning that Maya writing is only of marginal application since it is secondary to those more primary institutions--economy and society--so well studied by the dirt archaeologists." Coe sees that attitude as "sour grapes" and ascribes it to "the inability or unwillingness of anthropologically trained archaeologists to admit that they are dealing with the remains of real people, who once lived and spoke." --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

“A great story told clearly and passionately by a great Mayanist.” -

Science “As good an introduction to the world of the Maya, and of Maya scholars, as one is likely to get.” - USA Today “Portrays a Maya culture obsessed with warfare, dynastic rivalries, and ritual bloodletting, yet rich with masterpieces in art and architecture.” - Science News

This book provides a thorough discussion of the progress...and regressions...in the decryption of Mayan writing. I read it after finishing Margalit Fox's new book on the deciphering of Egyptian writing. Both were fascinating discussions of the processes involved in the task and the missteps of the investigators. And both make real the unattractive side of academia...selfishness over sources, the cult of personality, and the reluctance to consider new evidence and theories. Some reviewers commented negatively on these points, but they are all part of discovery...think of the battles over access to the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the prolonged rejection of plate tectonics, asteroids destroying dinosaurs, and birds evolving from dinosaurs. The process is as interesting as the result! I think Professor Coe was very evenhanded in his telling of the story.

Riveting, fascinating, I learned new things on every page. Haven't finished it yet and am looking forward to the rest of the book.

This is a fascinating book and a good read. I remember the National Geographic articles from the 1950's when the Mayan Temples with their indecipherable glyphs were being discovered in the jungles. It was very interesting how Cold War politics interfered with the recognition of a Russian scholar who made the 'big breakthrough' in the decipherment as he was painted (better 'tainted') with the 'tar brush of Soviet pseudo-science.' After reading this, you will want to read 'The Decipherment of Linear B' by John Chadwick and 'Cracking the Egyptian Code: The Revolutionary Life of Jean-Francois Champollion' by Andrew Robinson.

good svc

This is a very interesting story told by one of the principal players. The book gets rather technical at times, but it's worth the effort. The author has some very strong opinions about his colleagues, but that's all the more fun as an insight into the academic world.

the documentary is great, too

A good story needs a villain. The villain of the book in question is Sir Eric Thompson, who must have been a fascinating figure (in fact I've been looking for some biography of him after reading the present work). Skip the first chapter, which concerns writing systems in general, and you get a hilarious work (perhaps the author had James Watson's "Double Helix" in mind when writing), abounding with anecdotes and gossips of the nasty academic world. Thompson is the arch-villain, but the author's censure on the "field anthropologists" is also severe. The first chapter seems to mar the whole work, which is a bit too long, and is not very accurate. For example, the Chinese writing system doesn't have "214 determinatives" as the author claims (p. 32) -- there're 214 "section headers" in a traditional Chinese dictionary, which were devised by lexicographers, and are not supposed to tell "one the general class of phenomena to which the thing named belongs" (p. 31), although the two concepts have overlapping. Of course these're only minor mistakes, and to them we should not pay too much attention, as the author warns us, unwittingly: "It will be recalled that Thompson dealt posthumously with Whorf by paying no attention whatsoever to Whorf's larger points, and devoting much ink to the latter's minor mistakes (and mistakes they were), like a terrier worrying a rat." (p. 152). All the same, one star has been deducted!

a thorough and intricate book and the writing of the Mayas. Definitely a textbook for the next class i

teach.

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