NO PREP

Maya Writing

Cracking the Hieroglyphic Code

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Name: Period: Date:

Maya Writing: Cracking the Hieroglyphic Code

A Writing System Deliberately Ignored

The Maya possessed one of the most sophisticated writing systems ever developed in the ancient Americas — a complex mix of logograms (symbols representing whole words or concepts) and syllabic signs (symbols representing sounds) that could express virtually anything the human voice could say. And for most of the 20th century, mainstream Western scholarship insisted it could not be decoded, or even that it was not really writing at all. The story of how Maya glyphs were finally deciphered is as much a story about academic politics, Cold War tensions, and intellectual stubbornness as it is about linguistic breakthrough. Spanish colonial authorities actually made the decipherment harder by destroying almost everything the Maya had written. In 1562, a Franciscan friar named Diego de Landa ordered a mass burning of Maya books — codices — in the town of Mani in the Yucatan. By his own account, he burned 27 codices and hundreds of other objects. Landa viewed Maya writing as the work of the devil. The destruction was catastrophic. Of all the

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The Long Road to Decipherment

After the Spanish conquest, Maya glyphs became a puzzle that linguists and archaeologists puzzled over for centuries. Early researchers correctly identified that glyphs recorded dates: the mathematical regularity of Maya calendar notations made numerical patterns relatively easy to spot. By the early 20th century, scholars like Eric Thompson, the dominant figure in Maya studies for decades, had established the view that Maya writing was largely or entirely logographic: each glyph represented a complete concept, not a sound. Thompson was a formidable

scholar and a forceful personality, and his views set the agenda for Maya epigraphy (the study of inscriptions) for a generation. The problem was that Thompson was wrong. And a young Soviet linguist named Yuri Knorosov would prove it, at enormous personal and professional cost.

Knorosov's Breakthrough

Yuri Knorosov was a linguist working in Leningrad in the early 1950s. Working largely from photographs of the few surviving Maya codices and from Diego de Landa's own writings (ironically, Landa had recorded an 'alphabet' of Maya signs), Knorosov proposed that Maya writing was not purely logographic but phonetic. The glyphs represented syllables that could be combined to spell words. He published his findings in 1952. The Western scholarly community, led by Thompson, rejected Knorosov's work almost immediately, partly on linguistic grounds, but also partly because he was a Soviet scientist during the Cold War. Thompson dismissed his analysis as Marxist propaganda. Knorosov was unable to travel to see the actual Maya sites and manuscripts due to Soviet restrictions, conducting his entire analysis from photographs. Despite his isolation, he was right. Over the following decades, as more scholars tested his phonetic approach against inscriptions, evidence mounted overwhelmingly in his favor. In 1960, Tatiana Proskouriakoff proved that inscriptions recorded actual historical events and rulers rather than abstract astronomical data. By the 1970s and 1980s, a new generation of epigraphers — including Linda Schele, who helped decode royal court terminology — were reading Maya texts with increasing accuracy. The annual Palenque round table conferences, where scholars gathered to share breakthroughs, became famous for the excitement of people deciphering history in real time. Today, scholars can read roughly 90 percent of all Maya glyphs.

What the Glyphs Tell Us

The content of Maya inscriptions transformed understanding of Maya civilization completely. Rather than peaceful astronomer-priests, as Thompson's model implied, the inscriptions revealed warrior-kings, brutal military campaigns, the capture and sacrifice of rival rulers, and intense political competition between city-states. The Long Count dates on stelae were not just mathematical exercises — they recorded specific historical events: coronations, wars, births, deaths, royal marriages. Maya glyphs were carved into stone monuments, painted onto pottery, incised into jade

and bone, and written in codices on bark paper. The writing system was used for everything from royal propaganda to merchant records to astronomical tables. The Dresden Codex, one of the four surviving books, contains Venus tables of remarkable astronomical accuracy — predictions of Venus's movements that match actual planetary motion within a tiny margin of error. The Madrid Codex contains almanacs used by priests for divination. Every surviving text is a window into a living intellectual tradition.

Still Deciphering

The work is not finished. Hundreds of inscriptions contain passages that scholars cannot yet fully read. New inscriptions are discovered regularly as archaeological sites are excavated and LiDAR surveys identify new monuments. The field of Maya epigraphy is actively expanding, and collaborations between academic linguists, archaeologists, and Maya community members who speak modern descendant languages are accelerating progress. Reading Maya glyphs today is a living research enterprise, not a completed achievement.

Key Information: Maya Writing System

Detail	Information
Writing Type	Mixed logographic and syllabic (phonetic); can express any spoken language
Surviving Codices	Only 4 survive (Dresden, Madrid, Paris, Grolier); rest burned by Spanish
Book Burning	1562 CE; Diego de Landa burned 27 codices at Mani, Yucatan
Knorosov's Breakthrough	1952; proposed phonetic (syllabic) reading; dismissed during Cold War
Thompson's Error	Insisted glyphs were purely logographic; blocked acceptance for decades
Proskouriakoff's Role	Proved inscriptions recorded real historical rulers and events

Detail	Information
Current Readability	Approximately 90% of Maya glyphs can now be read
Content Revealed	Wars, kings, sacrifices, dynasties — not just astronomy as once thought

Case Study: The Manuscript in the Photograph

It was 1950 in Leningrad, and Yuri Knorosov, 27 years old, had just returned from the war with a German library book tucked under his arm — a reproduction of the three known Maya codices, saved from a burning library in Berlin. He hadn't planned to study Maya writing. He had been assigned to prove that all writing systems began as pictographs before evolving into phonetic scripts. But the Maya glyphs wouldn't leave him alone. He worked in a small apartment, no access to the actual manuscripts, no ability to travel abroad. He had photographs and Landa's colonial-era alphabet, which his colleagues considered useless. 'A Spaniard who burned their books is going to tell us how to read them?' his supervisor asked. Knorosov tested syllable after syllable, cross-referencing signs with Landa's alphabet, looking for repeating patterns in contexts where objects were illustrated alongside glyphs. When he published in 1952, his Soviet colleagues celebrated. Then he saw Thompson's response from the United States: 'Soviet propaganda disguised as linguistics.' Knorosov returned to his desk. 'I will outlast him,' he told a colleague. And he did. He lived to see his method universally accepted. When he finally traveled to see the Maya sites in person for the first time in 1990, he was 67 years old.

1. What obstacles — both political and academic — did Knorosov face in getting his research accepted? How do these obstacles reflect broader issues in how science works?

2. The reading describes Diego de Landa as both the man who burned the Maya books and the man whose writing helped decode them. What does this contradiction tell us about how colonial records of indigenous cultures must be used by archaeologists?

Multiple Choice

1. What was Eric Thompson's incorrect claim about Maya writing that slowed decipherment for decades?

a) That Maya glyphs were purely logographic and not phonetic

b) That Maya writing was a simple alphabet with 26 letters

c) That Maya codices were forgeries produced after the Spanish conquest

d) That Maya writing could not record historical events

2. What did Tatiana Proskouriakoff contribute to the decipherment of Maya writing?

a) She published the first phonetic reading of Maya syllables and glyphs in 1952

b) She translated the Dresden Codex's Venus astronomical tables

c) She proved that Maya inscriptions recorded real historical rulers and events

d) She recovered the original codices burned at Mani in 1562

3. Which of the following best explains why Maya writing had been so resistant to decipherment for centuries?

a) Maya writing only recorded astronomical data rather than daily commerce and general spoken language

b) Nearly all written Maya texts were destroyed and dominant scholars rejected the phonetic approach

c) LiDAR technology had not yet revealed enough inscriptions to work with

d) The glyphs used a completely unknown language with no living descendants

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Logograph	A) The process of figuring out how to read an unknown writing system or language
2. ___ Syllabary	B) A Maya book made of bark paper, folded accordion-style; only four survive
3. ___ Codex	C) A symbol that represents a complete word or concept rather than a sound
4. ___ Decipherment	D) The scholarly study of inscriptions, including carved or painted written texts
5. ___ Epigraphy	E) A set of written symbols each representing a syllable in a spoken language

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Soviet linguist _____ published his phonetic reading of Maya glyphs in 1952, though Western scholars initially dismissed his work.

2. Of all the Maya books that once existed, only _____ codices survive today, three held in European museums and one in Mexico City.

3. The _____ Codex contains Venus astronomical tables of remarkable accuracy, predicting planetary movements within a tiny margin of error.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. How did Cold War politics affect the acceptance of Knorosov's decipherment of Maya writing? What does this episode reveal about how scientific knowledge can be blocked by non-scientific factors?

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2. What did the content of Maya inscriptions reveal about Maya civilization that contradicted the earlier model of the 'peaceful astronomer-priests'? Provide specific examples from the reading.

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3. Explain why the burning of Maya codices by Diego de Landa in 1562 was such a significant loss for archaeology. What specific types of knowledge were destroyed, and how does this affect our understanding of the ancient Maya today?

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