Special section
The archaeology of Maya decipherment

The discovery of Maya civilization was one of the greater adventures of archaeology's romantic era. There was no grander tour through the lost relics of unknown times than Stephens and Catherwood's travels through the Maya region in 1839–40, when they visited the great sites like Palenque, and reflected on 'the spectacle of this once great and lovely city, overturned, desolate, and lost, discovered by accident, overgrown with trees for miles around, and without even a name to distinguish it' (Stephens 1841: II, 356–7). The size of the sites, the scale of the pyramids and monuments, the sculpture, the stelae like the one they uncovered at Copan (FIGURE 1) – all these gave Stephens and Catherwood 'the assurance that the objects we were in search of were interesting, not only as the remains of an unknown people but as works of art, proving, like newly discovered historical records, that the people who once occupied the Continent of America were not savages' (Stephens 1841: I, 102).

Stephens called the 'emblematic devices' on the stelae 'hieroglyphics', using the name that had been applied for centuries to the pictographic form of writing that similarly adorned the public monuments of ancient Egypt: 'A fair obelisquie . . . 50 cubits high beset with letters Hieroglificque', as a 16th-century scholar described one (Washington 1585). Egyptian hieroglyphs had been deciphered a generation before Stephens, thanks to the parallel texts in different scripts on the Rosetta stone; and the study of ancient Egypt has ever since been a collaboration of archaeology and history.

There were, and are, no parallel texts for Maya writing. As direct evidence there are only the codices, just three or four in number, that survived the Conquest, and the evidence of the inscriptions themselves. The attempt at a transliterated Mayan alphabet in the *Relación de las cosas de Yucatan* of Diego de Landa, the man most notorious for the *auto-da-fés* that extirpated hieroglyphic books, has also been crucial.

Decipherment is a discipline which consumes its own subject-matter. The decipher-



FIGURE 1. *Stela H at Copan, from a drawing of 1839 by Frederick Catherwood (published in Catherwood 1844), that deservedly has often been reproduced as a masterpiece of 19th-century archaeological illustration.*

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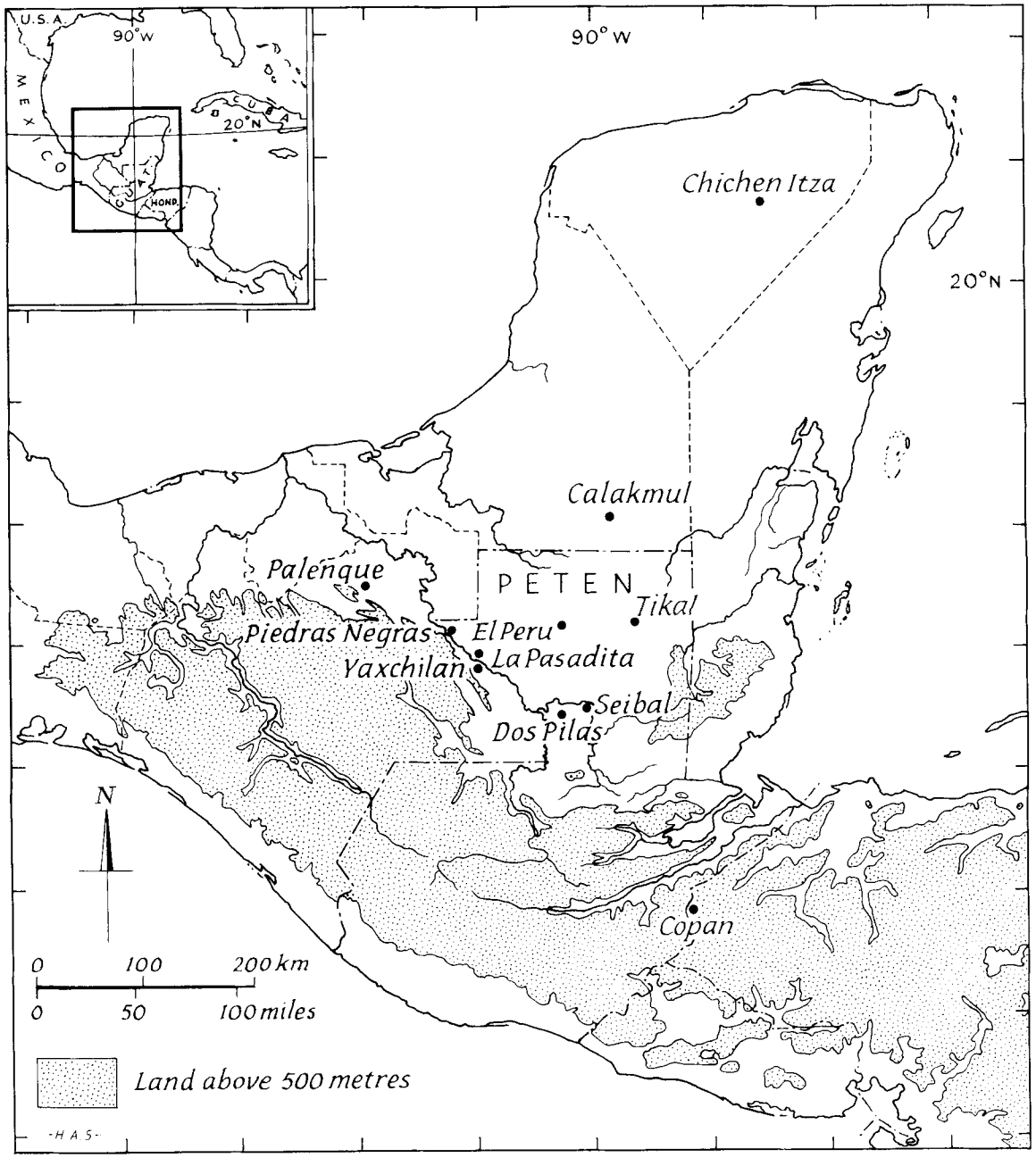


FIGURE 2. *The Maya area, with principal regions and sites. There are further maps in the section papers.*

ment in 1952 of Linear B, as Minoan–Mycenaean Greek, and now the gradual unravelling of Mayan, leaves Indus as the one major script of a literate civilization which may still be an absolute puzzle.

A decipherment makes for a fundamental change, as it brings an era from prehistory into history. That is a rare intellectual event in archaeology. If one can set aside the Indus script – which occurs only on seals – as a rather

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quieter matter, the Maya revolution that we are in the middle of may be the Last of the Great Decipherments.

What a great decipherment amounts to depends on what the texts choose to tell. For Minoan Crete, we have records of tribute, counts of sheep-flocks from the office archives, but no public inscriptions, and no personal names of princes or rulers. Maya and Egyptian inscriptions are open, boldly carved in public places. And for the Maya, as we now know, we have for the most part dynastic records, in some ways resembling the king-lists of ancient Egypt or Roman imperial inscriptions.

Alongside the revolution offered by decipherment has run a whole series of advances in other aspects of Maya studies: in settlement patterns; in trade and exchange systems, and in economics; in the agricultural systems of drained fields whose productivity made the great public works possible.

Much of that research has depended on going out from the visible monuments into the hinterland, despite the formidable obstacles to extensive fieldwork that the tropical landscape presents. The pattern of Maya research began in the spectacular structures visible in the centres, exploring them to a first limit of knowledge; then it moved out to explore the different, quieter evidence offered by peripheries; now it returns to look at the centres, not just with the insights of decipherment, but with an understanding of the context which made the centres possible. (That said, the textual evidence, from the monumental inscriptions and from glyphs on pottery vessels, helps fill out a picture of Maya society in which drugs, blood, bloodletting, and a macabre underworld have roles in a manner that Rider Haggard might have dreamed of.)

Our FIGURE 1, of Copan stela H, comes from the first great reconnaissance of 1839–40. The Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copan was excavated by the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, in 1892–5, in the first generation of systematic record, and restored by the Carnegie Institute in the 1930s. Now the Copan Mosaics Project, on which William Fash writes below, has come back to look intensively again at the Stairway hieroglyphs, with new interests, but depending also on Peabody and Carnegie records of what has since eroded away.

A similar process has gone on in studies of other classical civilizations; by coincidence, another paper in this issue of ANTIQUITY illustrates the same cycle. In Mediterranean archaeology, after a period when research interest moved out from excavation in the towns to field-survey in the ancient countryside, those newer techniques of extensive survey are now being turned back to gain new understandings of the cities (Snodgrass & Bintliff, above).

As a careful reading of the articles that follow clearly indicates, new understandings of written texts should not lead to a revival of the now-abandoned over-emphasis on the élite aspects of ancient Maya culture. Rather, a systematic examination of both élite and non-élite aspects of Maya civilization holds out most promise for advances in our comprehension of Maya development. Moreover, concern with decipherment of Classic inscriptions should not overshadow research on Preclassic and Postclassic times when hieroglyphic texts are not found. (Three recent general books on the Maya with extensive reference-material are Coe 1987; Hammond 1985; Morley, Brainerd & Sharer 1983.)

Maya long count	**period**	**Gregorian calendar years**
	colonial	
11.15.0.0.0		AD 1500
	Postclassic	
10.5.0.0.0		AD 900
	Classic	
8.12.0.0.0		AD 250
	Preclassic	
		2000 BC

TABLE 1. *Maya chronology in brief summary (after Hammond 1985). There is a detailed chart of Classic chronology in Culbert's paper.*

Decipherment makes an obvious watershed in Maya studies, though it has not taken place overnight: the first breakthrough papers, dating to 1958–60, are now 30 years old, and Stephen Houston tells us here that a 'complete decipherment of Mayan glyphs is an event that neither we, nor perhaps our children, shall ever see'. But progress is very fast now, and this seemed the right time to publish a special section on the decipherment and its radical consequences for Maya archaeology. In the papers below:

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Ian Graham sets out what has happened to the hieroglyphic inscriptions themselves, and how many scholars and some countries are attempting to combat the criminal looting of Maya sites and its consequences.

Stephen Houston shows, with clarity amidst complexity, how Mayanists have come to accept the role of a phonetic approach in glyphic decipherment, after a generation of intellectual battle.

T. Patrick Culbert follows with an important and stimulating, albeit controversial, synthesis that emerged from a recent School of American Research Advanced Seminar, reinterpreting Classic Maya political history in the light of new decipherments.

David Stuart then reports on the ceramic function he was able to deduce from deciphering a short inscription on a bowl from Río Azul, Guatemala, and the confirmation made by chemical analysis.

William Fash shows how research at that most famous Maya site, Copan in Honduras, combines archaeological and epigraphical studies in a new view of political development at the site.

Finally, **Christopher Peebles** reviews two books from major traditions in Maya research, in the light of the new Maya history

CHRISTOPHER CHIPPINDALE,
NORMAN HAMMOND & JEREMY A. SABLOFF

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Homeless hieroglyphs

IAN GRAHAM*

The looting

Recently, more than ever, Mesoamericanists have had reason to share in the regret felt by Egyptologists at one aspect of the history of antiquities-looting in Egypt – one clearly tinged with tragic irony. For, as Brian Fagan (1975: 11, 261) and others have pointed out, attempts to remove sculpture from ancient Egyptian sites on a large scale began only in the 1820s, and that was just the period when Champollion was achieving his basic decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. Since the coveted bas-relief sculptures usually had to be prised from their settings by using chisels and crowbars, any associated hieroglyphic inscriptions tended to end up in smithereens. Champollion himself, as he travelled through Egypt seeking and transcribing texts, became appalled at the destruction, yet more than half a century would pass before collectors and museums came to recognize the damage they were causing through their purchases.

The lesson, however, was soon forgotten, and a second tragedy, closely parallel to the Egyptian, occurred in recent times when heavy looting of Maya monumental sculpture hap-

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