

# PREFACE

Almost 160 years ago, the jungle-shrouded ruins of the ancient Maya civilization of Mexico and Central America were discovered by the American diplomat John Lloyd Stephens and his companion Frederick Catherwood, an English topographical artist. It was Stephens' hope that some Champollion would soon come along and decipher the strange hieroglyphs on the many carved monuments that they had encountered, but that was not to be. A century of intensive research on the glyphs resulted in the unraveling of the complex Maya calendar and astronomy, but *decipherment*—meaning the matching of signs to the language encoded in the script - was not to occur on any significant scale until the decade of the 1950s. Since then, there has been substantial progress, and it can now be said that we can actually read the majority of Maya texts, whether inscribed on stone or written in codices (books), in their original language.

That the Maya script is a somewhat difficult one, both in its underlying structure and in the way scribes rang variations on it, cannot be denied. Yet the subject matter of most public inscriptions, like those of ancient Egypt, is relatively restricted, and there is much repetition and redundancy. For the senior author, having visited the cities of the Nile armed with several "how to" pamphlets, and having derived much additional pleasure and understanding from being able to read royal names, dedications, and other matters important to the pharaohs, it struck him that a beginner's manual to the Maya glyphs could also be written. Our models here are Karl-Theodor Zauzich's excellent introduction to Egyptian writing, *Hieroglyphs without Mystery* (1992), and the more extensive (and intensive) *How to Read Egyptian Hieroglyphs* by Mark Collier and Bill Manley (1998). A brief pamphlet by the late Sir Eric Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphs without Tears*, appeared in 1972, and while well illustrated, was hopelessly out of date even in the year of its publication.

As in Egypt, among the Maya there was a strong linkage between text and picture, one providing a commentary on the other, and the reader to whom this

book is directed will be well rewarded when he or she discovers that relationship in a particular stela or tablet. The fact that a ruler or scribe who lived over a thousand years ago can speak to us across the gulf of time and space, and be understood, is a reward in itself.

We have presumed no previous knowledge of the Maya or their script. Our aim has been to take the reader step by step into decipherment, with examples taken from real texts. Our hope is that the amateur traveler visiting the Maya ruins, and perhaps even the beginning and intermediate student, will be able through this manual to read relatively simple texts, and to gain a deeper understanding of the remarkable civilization that produced them.

One of the problems in dealing with Maya writing is that of artistic license among the early scribes - in contrast to the situation with the Egyptian script, there can be no standardized font for the Maya glyphs since the scribes were free, within bounds, to use their imaginations on how they wrote particular glyphs, and were encouraged to do so by their royal patrons (///. 3: see Illustration Examples pages 137–154). The junior author, Mark Van Stone, a trained calligrapher, has produced nearly all of the drawings in this book; for each and every glyph he has tried to find order in the variation, concentrating on the distinctive features which differentiate that sign from all others.

We would encourage the reader who would like to delve even deeper into the Classic and Post-Classic Maya to attend the Maya workshops, seminars, and weekend courses that are now given at several universities across the United States. The most venerable of these is the Maya Hieroglyphic Workshop at the University of Texas in Austin. Each of these sessions is open to registrants on any level of expertise, and attendees are furnished with Xeroxed handbooks that are themselves mines of information on both script and culture.

On page 168 we have included several programs and formulae for the calculation of Maya dates. Armed with these and with a hand calculator, the traveler to the land of the Maya ought to be able to handle most calendrical expressions; the stay-at-home student with a laptop or desk computer would be best served by any one of several excellent advanced programs which we have listed in the same appendix.

### **Pronunciation guide**

The early Franciscan friars who came to the Maya realm with the Spanish conquistadores developed an orthography for writing the native languages - particularly Yucatek —alphabetically, and until recently this has remained in

use among Maya scholars, with some slight modifications. However, during the 1980s a more modern orthography was promulgated by the Academy of Maya Languages in Guatemala, and this has become the standard for both linguists and epigraphers. It is the one that will be used here, with slight modification.

The vowels (*a, e, i, o, u*) are generally pronounced as they would be in Spanish. However, in most Mayan languages, including that of the Classic inscriptions, there is a distinction between long and short vowels; switching from one to the other can change the meaning of a word. Long vowels are marked by doubling, as in *baak*, "bone."

Another distinction made in Mayan is between non-glottalized and glottalized consonants. To pronounce the latter, the throat is constricted, with the result that such stops are accompanied by a very slight "explosion" of air. Glottalization is here indicated by an apostrophe ('). Examples of how meanings change with glottalization are:

<i>chab</i> , "earth, bee"	<i>ch'ab</i> , "create, to fast"
<i>kan</i> , "snake"	<i>k'an</i> , "yellow"

Incidentally, linguists tell us that all *bs* in the language are actually glottalized (i.e. *chab'*, rather than *chab*), but since that trait makes no change in the meaning of words with *b*, and in the interests of simplicity, it will not be recognized in this book. It is also true that whenever a vowel begins a Mayan word, this is preceded by a glottal stop, but this is also the case in English (such as before the *a* in *apple*), and we see no need to confuse the reader with further apostrophes - there are quite enough here already!

There are two voiceless aspirates in Classic Mayan (the language recorded in the Maya inscriptions). One is *h*, very similar to English *b*, the other is *syj* a guttural consonant like the *ʃ* in Spanish *jarabe*, or the *ch* in German *Bach*. The *x* consonant is used to record a sound like English *sh*. The weak consonants *y* and *w* are sometimes used as glides from one vowel to another.

In the early stages of the decipherment, it was thought that the ancient Maya scribes could only approximate the sounds of their language in the script. We now realize that the Maya writing system was extremely advanced in how it recorded not only the phonetic distinctions described above, but also fine nuances of their complex grammar. In the hands of their specialists, it was a highly sophisticated and supple instrument to express whatever they wanted to say.