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Breaking The Maya Code

THIRD EDITION

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

MICHAEL D. COE

' Coe's thrilling account of the cracking of Mayan
is like a detective story ... great stuff '
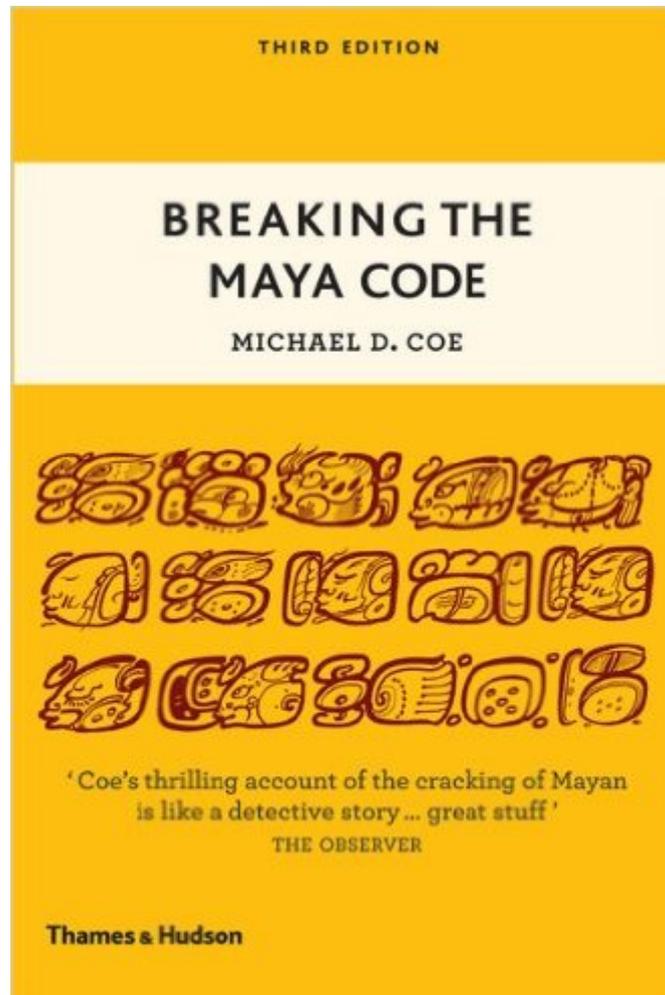THE OBSERVER

Thames & Hudson

Synopsis

The inside story of one of the major intellectual breakthroughs of our time - the last great decipherment of an ancient script. It will fascinate anyone interested in decipherment and puzzles as well as scholars of Maya civilization. The book has been revised and updated with the latest discoveries.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Michael Coe has been involved with Mayan writing for fifty years. The story he tells in "Breaking the Maya Code" involves his friends, his colleagues, and--in a couple of cases--his academic foes. The story is a scientific one, but Coe provides a look at the human history too.Mayan writing has only really started to give up its secrets in the last twenty five years. Coe's primary thesis (for which he makes a convincing case) is that there are two reason it took so long: first, there was no large, widely available corpus of Mayan writing for epigraphers to work on; second, there was a widely held belief among Mayanists that the writing did not represent spoken language, but instead represented "not Maya words or construction, but universal ideas".He spends some time on the story of Champollion's decipherment of Egyptian writing in the early nineteenth century, in order to be able to draw parallels with the state of play in Mayanist studies. Then he moves on through the

history of the subject, with short biographies of many of the key academic figures, bringing the story up to 1992. There's a short postscript for the 1999 edition.Coe makes no bones about the academic in-fighting. A couple of the reviews below object to his tone: he is very clear about who he thinks obstructed the field (Eric Thompson, for example), and who he thinks was critical to the successess (Yuri Knorosov). His comments about Thompson, while sometimes affectionate, attribute much of the delay in understanding Mayan writing to the deadening effect of Thompson's influence. Thompson, a well-respected and very influential Mayanist, believed that the glyphs had no relationship to any spoken Mayan language, and poured scorn (Coe quotes some reviews) on those who disagreed.

It took a long time before Maya script could be read in a coherent way. Up to the 1950s, no one was able to decipher the inscriptions chiselled into the Maya temples and palaces in the jungles of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Belize. Although many attempts at decipherment had been undertaken in the 19th and early 20th century by a number of - in some cases rather quixotic - Maya enthusiasts, they all lacked the linguistic training and the touch of genius that might have led them to a breakthrough. Thus, by the middle of the 20th century the generally accepted view among Maya scholars was that those glyphs represented neither words nor syntactical constructions but rather that they were to be interpreted as purely mythological allusions. The undisputed leader of this school of thought was Eric Thompson, Maya expert at Washington's Carnegie Institution.Opposing views of the Thompson school had occasionally been heard before, but only in 1952 did there arise an opponent formidable enough to effectively challenge the established opinion on the Maya glyphs. That year, Yuri V. Knorosov, a researcher at then Leningrad's Institute of Ethnology published his view that the Maya script was logographic, meaning that it consisted of a. logograms that express the meaning of words and b. phonetic-syllable signs (comparable to modern Japanese). Although the ensuing dispute between followers of Thompson and supporters of Knorosov continued for many years, today it is the Knorosov apporach that is being recognized as having given the decisive impetus that led to the decipherment of most Maya glyphs. Over the years, Knorosov's method was refined by generation after generation of gifted Maya scholars, among them Michael Coe, the author of this book and now professor emeritus of Anthropology at Yale University.

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