

THE LORDS OF THE MAYA REALM

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We Mayanists spend an inordinate amount of time deciphering half obliterated hieroglyphic texts. Often it seems that our results are not worth all that effort; but now and again some minor fact that hardly seems worth mentioning at the time can be used to pry open a chink in the wall of obscurity that surrounds the past, and suddenly we get a new and exciting glimpse of events that have left their traces on the old stones of Maya sites. When, in 1943, J. E. S. Thompson changed the date of Stela 14 of Piedras Negras, Guatemala, from A.D. 800, given it by Morley, to A.D. 761, the correction seemed of purely academic interest. The stela was on loan at the University Museum since 1933, and Satterthwaite, by the use of studio-quality photographs, was able to substantiate the new readings. Epigraphers made a note of them in their notebooks for future reference, and there the matter rested.

Thompson had described the stela and others like it as showing "gods seated in niches formed by the bodies of celestial dragons" (Fig. 1), and remarked in passing, without ascribing any special importance to the fact, that the correction of the date made Stela 14 the first monument to be erected in front of Temple O-13. One day, several years later, while wondering what the niche and celestial dragon motif might mean, I noticed that Stela 33, though it has no niche, presents a similar scene, and realized for the first time that the new reading of Stela 14 made all monuments of this type the first to be erected in a given location. Monuments with other motifs were then set up

every five years in the same place until another similar group was started near another temple. Thus there were distinct sets of monuments, each beginning with a "niche" stela. My first thought was that the "niche" motif represented the dedication of a new temple, and that the ladder marked with footsteps ascending to the niche symbolized the rise to the sky of the victim of sacrifice, whose body was sometimes shown at the foot of the ladder. It occurred to me that if I searched the inscriptions for a hieroglyph peculiar to these stelae, I might find the glyphic expression for human sacrifice. What I found instead started an entirely new train of thought and led to surprising conclusions.

True enough, there was a record of a date just prior to the erection-date on each "niche" stela, and this date of some immediately preceding event was always followed by a hieroglyph that Thompson, with one of his delightful flashes of humor, has dubbed "the toothache glyph" (Fig. 2). Anniversaries of the event were often subsequently recorded, but only on monuments of the same group. What I had not expected to find was that the only dates that any two groups of stelae had in common were some that marked the ends of conventional time periods, and even this happened rarely, though the recorded dates of two contiguous groups invariably overlapped in time. Evidently each group of monuments presents an independent set of records. Moreover, it is not the "toothache glyph" date that is the earliest in each set, but another that is anywhere from twelve to thirty-one years earlier and is always



Fig. 1. Stela 14 at Piedras Negras. The young lord sits in an elevated doorway or "niche" ascended by a ladder draped with a cloth or carpet with footprints that symbolize his ascent. Above the curtained doorway is a band of astronomical symbols, and at the very top, a bird with serpent-heads on its wings, wearing a grotesque mask and holding a serpent in its mouth. On the jambs are masks of the sun god, and just below, the two heads of the double-headed celestial dragon. In front stands a woman wearing a jaguar headdress and holding a feathered object of unknown significance. At the lower right is a somewhat eroded representation of human sacrifice.

This lord acceded in A.D. 761, just after the Bat-Jaguar of Lintel 3, and ruled less than five years. It may be that Lintel 3 commemorates the restoration of his dynasty after the untimely overthrow of his reign. The correction of the date on this monument led to the discovery of the significance of its motif and to the formulation of the "dynastic hypothesis," which sees the figures on Maya stelae as portraits of reigning lords.



accompanied by the so-called "upended frog glyph" (Fig. 3). This earlier event could not have had much public importance when it happened since no notation was made of it at the time. It was first recorded after the "toothache glyph" event occurred, and only then began to be celebrated by anniversaries.

Doubtless there are various events in history that are paired in this way, but surely the most common is the birth of some person who in his mature years acquires great prestige or political power. But if the "upended frog" date is a birth date, the fact that it was celebrated for only a limited period suggests that that period was the person's lifetime, and effectively refutes my original notion that the "toothache glyph" expresses the human sacrifice shown on "niche" stelae. More likely, these stelae portray the accession of a new ruler, the "seating on high of the Lord," as the Maya books put it. Subsequent stelae, too, are probably portraits of the lord.

To test this new idea, I calculated the length of time covered by each set of records. There were only three sets whose full span was known, and the figures were 60, 64, and 56 years. These are reasonable lifetimes for rulers who lived at a time when the ordered setting up of monuments suggests tranquil conditions. I was greatly encouraged, feeling that at last I might be on the right track.

The next step, of course, was to identify the names of the lords, or at least to make sure that the birth and accession date referred to the same individual. If so, the "upended frog glyph" (birth date), and the "toothache glyph" (accession) of each set of records would be followed by the

same glyph, which would differ for every set. This actually proved to be the case, though the name was expressed by three or four glyphs, and sometimes a glyph was omitted or substituted by another. After all, an important lord is bound to have various honorifics and titles. The first glyph was always the same after both dates, and I felt confident that my identification of the name phrases was correct. But did these "names" refer to the sculptured figures?

I was convinced that they did when I examined the texts on Stelae 1 and 2. These stelae are eroded on the front, where the portrait of the lord appears, and on the sides, but on the back each has a complete text and a sculptured figure dressed in a long robe. Many Mayanists had believed that the robe was a priestly garment worn by men, but here both texts record the same birth date followed by the same two name glyphs with a prefix which is clearly a face of a woman, identified by a black (cross-hatched) spot or a lock of hair on the forehead (Fig. 4a). What is more, on Stela 3, which shows a small figure seated beside the one in the robe, the text contains a second birth date, thirty-three years later than the first and only three years earlier than the final date on the stela. This later birth date is followed by a different set of name glyphs (Fig. 4b), though they, too, are prefixed by female faces. How can one reasonably doubt that both robed figures are portraits of the same person, that the person is a woman, and that her little daughter, not yet born when Stela 1 was erected, is shown on Stela 3 (Fig. 5)? The theme of family suggested by this woman and child is quite consistent with the theme of dynasty in which questions of marriage and descent are always involved, but it would be difficult to reconcile it with a theme of Maya religion.

In retrospect, the idea that Maya texts record history, naming the rulers or lords of the towns, seems so natural that it is strange it has not been thoroughly explored before. The reason is that the only substantial progress made in the decipherment of texts dealt with astronomical and calendrical notations, and these form such a large part of the inscriptions that there appeared to be no room left for historical narrative. The Maya, however, had a conception of history different from ours. Even in colonial times their historical statements were very cryptic and were often mixed with prophesy, for they believed that every event casts its shadow on the future. Thus, if we accept the "dynastic hypothesis," as it is currently called, we may yet find that the birth date of the



Fig. 2. Two forms of the "toothache" or "accession" glyph. This glyph indicates the accession to power of the lord named in the glyphs that follow it. The date of this accession and the birthday of the lord are often repeated on subsequent stelae and celebrated by anniversaries.

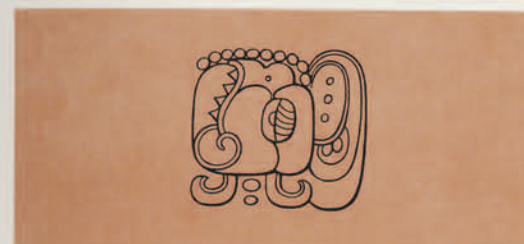


Fig. 3. The "upended frog" or "birth date" glyph. This glyph follows the earliest date associated with the group of name glyphs immediately after it. If the name is that of a lord, this birth date may be repeated on later monuments.

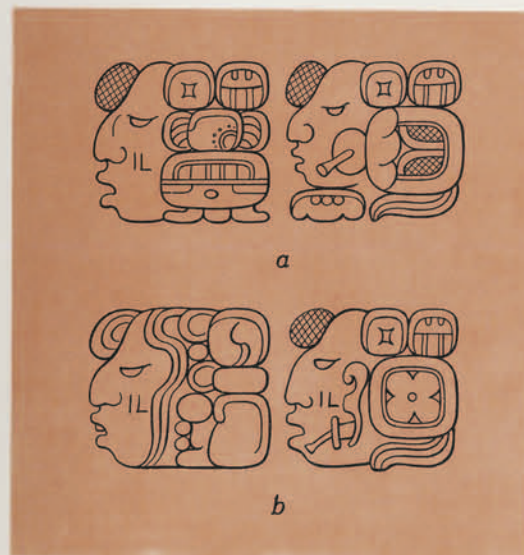


Fig. 4. The "name" glyphs of the woman and her daughter depicted on the back of Stela 3. The woman's first name "Katun" is the designation for a twenty-year period, but is known also as a part of a feminine name or title in Yucatan. Women's names are always prefixed by a profile face, identified as that of a woman by the cross-hatched oval or lock of hair on the forehead.



Fig. 5. The back of Stela 3, Piedras Negras. The woman sitting on the throne is named in the inscription above, as is the child beside her. Their birth dates are 33 years apart. The front of this monument, portraying the ruling lord, is badly eroded. His name probably appears on the sides, together with the date of the erection of the stela, A.D. 711.

Fig. 6. Various combinations of the jaguar glyph.

a: The Shield-Jaguar, one of the "names" of a lord who ruled at Yaxchilan early in the eighth century.

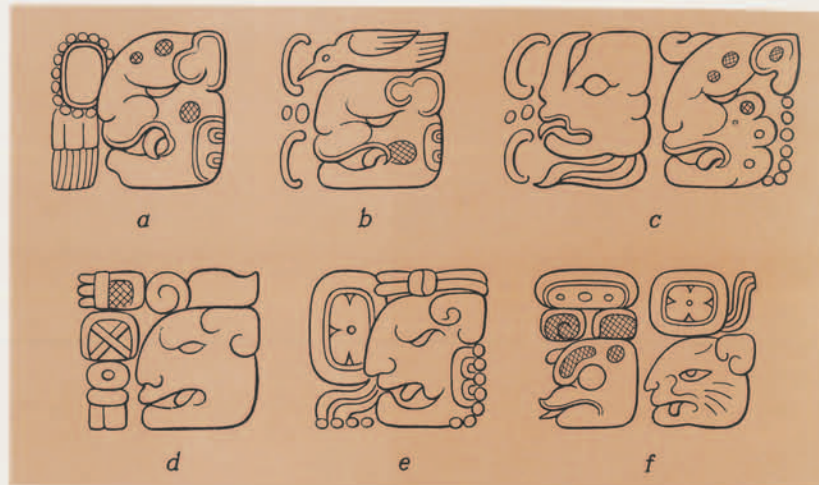
b: The Bird-Jaguar, who succeeded him in A.D. 752.

c: The Bat-Jaguar, whose accession is recorded at Piedras Negras.

d: The jaguar glyph from the "jaguar-protector" lintel of Temple I at Tikal.

e: The corresponding glyph, Kin-Jaguar, from a similar lintel in Temple IV.

f: The "relative?" of the Kin-Jaguar, named on Stela 1, Aguateca. (After a drawing by Ian Graham.)



lord and his accession date were not inscribed for historical purposes alone, but mainly to provide a base for the prognosis of the fortunes of a given reign. This may explain the emphasis on astronomical data given with the dates. In any case, it is well to remember that the hypothesis is still far from being established to everyone's satisfaction. A great deal remains to be done before a crucial test of it can be made. One of the first tasks will be to study the structure of all the purported "name phrases," so that we can separate proper names from titles, lineage designations, and other epithets applied to the lords and their dependents. The identity of some of the persons or entities mentioned in the texts is still clouded with complications and contradictions, and doubtless will continue to trouble us for some time.

There is one group of hieroglyphs in particular for which I have not found a satisfactory explanation. This group comprises jaguar-glyphs with varying prefixes and super-fixes (Fig. 6). Two of the combinations appear to be names of lords who ruled Yaxchilan, a city up-river from Piedras Negras and on the opposite bank. Here, on Lintels 29 and 30, are clearly recorded the birth and accession dates of a certain Bird-Jaguar (Fig. 6b), who also has additional designations. His accession in A.D. 752 is recorded again on Stela 11, where he is shown wearing a sun-mask before three prisoners (Fig. 7). Above him (in the sky?) are two seated figures, a man and a woman, with their names inscribed at the sides. The man's name includes a Shield-Jaguar glyph (Fig. 6a), and elsewhere appears on earlier Yaxchilan lintels, so that even without having the accession date we may suppose that the Shield-Jaguar is the predecessor and perhaps the progenitor of the Bird-Jaguar lord. So far everything is clear and consistent with our hypothesis.

But on Stela 12, which was apparently erected at the same time as Stela 11, the accession date of the Bird-Jaguar is followed not by its usual expression, but by a variant form and then by an unusually complicated name phrase including a Jaguar glyph preceded by a Bat (Fig. 4c). There is some possibility that the Bat-Jaguar is named here as the heir-apparent to the Bird-Jaguar lord, or as a co-ruler or high official. What is curious is that his accession date does not appear at Yaxchilan, but at Piedras Negras, where it is incised on the background of Lintel 3, next to a throne on which a chief holds audience before a group of people (Fig. 9). The precise date of this accession is uncertain (probably A.D. 757, five years after the accession of the Bird-Jaguar, and seemingly during his reign), and it is not recorded on any of the surviving stelae. The lintel itself was carved after A.D. 782, but the dates recorded on it cover more than thirty years, and it is impossible to say which of the recorded events is shown in the sculpture. The first date recorded falls in A.D. 749, and is stated to be the twenty-year anniversary of the accession of a ruler portrayed on Stela 11 of Piedras Negras, in front of Temple J-3. About twelve years after this accession, a very unusual and striking motif was carved on Stela 10, which stands in the same group. Here the lord is shown seated on a cushion, and behind him is a huge jaguar, reared on hind legs and with one forepaw extended forward over the head of the seated figure. There are no hieroglyphs surviving except those of the currently completed period. What can be the meaning of this obviously symbolic scene? Is the jaguar a god-protector of the lord? Is he a foreign overlord to whom the ruler of the town is subject? Or does he represent a lineage, symbolized by the most powerful animal known to the Maya? Above all,



Fig. 7. Stela 11, Yaxchilan, which records the accession of the Bird-Jaguar, shown wearing a sun-mask, in front of three prisoners. Above are the Shield-Jaguar and a woman, probably his wife.



Fig. 8. The "jaguar-protector" motif on a lintel of Temple I, Tikal. The name of the ruling lord is the same that appears on Stela 16, erected in A.D. 711. The lord is seated, and above him can be seen the head of the Jaguar and one extended paw. This motif is associated with another lord in Temple IV, where the jaguar-figure appears as a man.

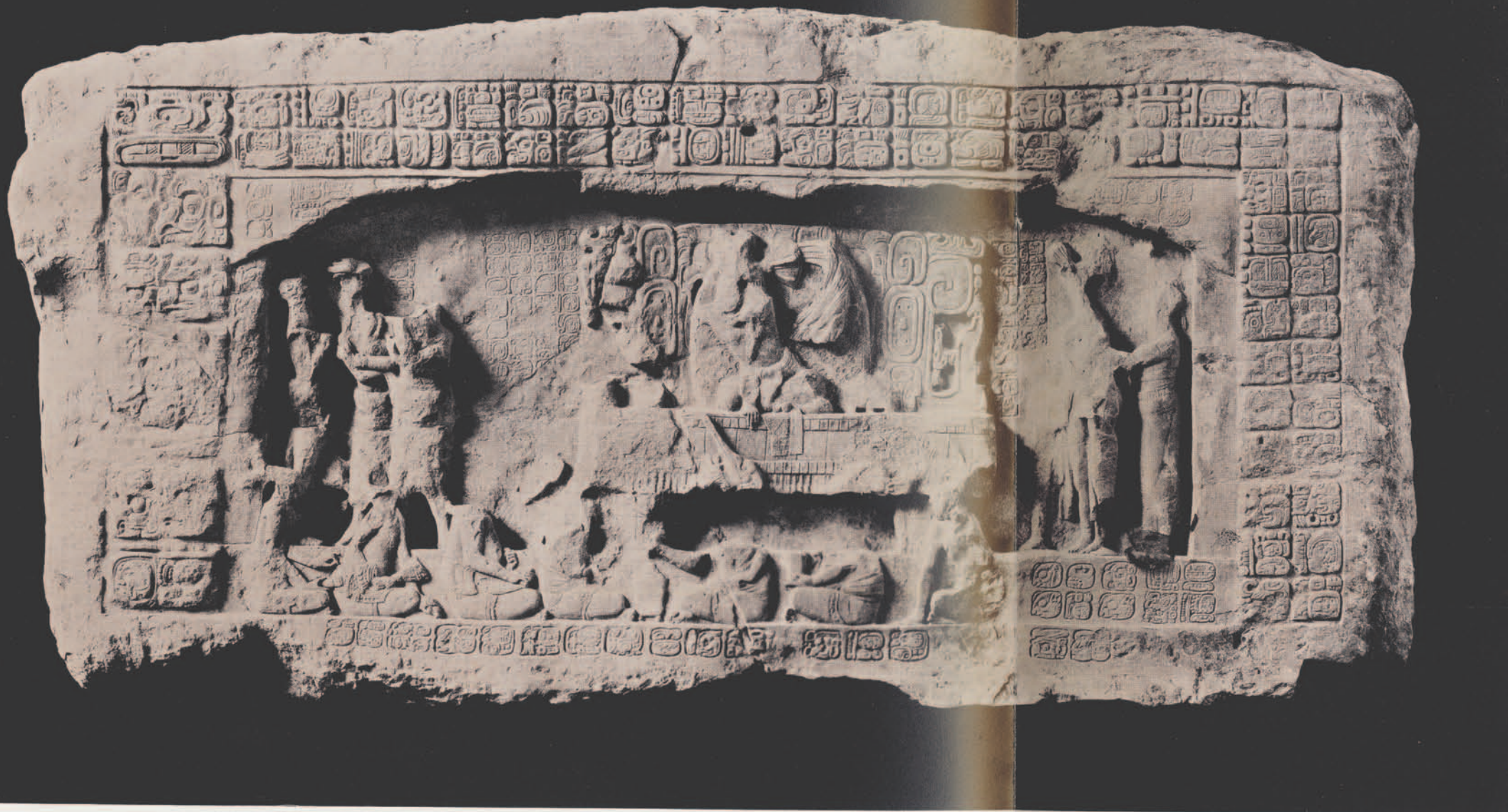


Fig. 9. Lintel 3, Piedras Negras. The scene shows a lord probably the Bat-Jaguar, seated upon a throne before a council of elders. At his right is a small group of men; at his left, three children presided over by a woman servant. This scene may present deliberations which placed the young lord shown on Stela 14 on the throne of Piedras Negras. The lintel, carved after 782, may justify the right of succession of the lord who began his rule in 785.

is there any significance in the fact that the accession date of the current ruler is linked with the Bat-Jaguar from Yaxchilan on Lintel 3?

According to Satterthwaite's calculations based on radiocarbon dates, near the beginning of the eighth century, probably even prior to the reign of the Shield-Jaguar at Yaxchilan, the motif of the jaguar-protector was carved on a wooden lintel in Temple I at Tikal (Fig. 8). Roughly forty or fifty years later, it was repeated on a lintel of Temple IV, this time with the "protector" in the form of a man, still bearing, however, certain jaguar and sun symbols. The texts of both lintels contain jaguar glyphs (Fig. 6d, e), but not as names of the ruling lords. The rulers' names are known from contemporary stelae, and appear on the lintels linked with the jaguar-glyphs in

clauses. On the later lintel, the jaguar glyph is prefixed by the sign *Kin* (day or sun), and this same Kin-Jaguar is mentioned also on Stelae 1 and 2 at the newly discovered site of Aguateca, many kilometers south of Tikal. On these stelae, the Kin-Jaguar glyph is part of a name-phrase, but again is apparently not the proper name of the ruler, for it is preceded by another glyph that seems to indicate some sort of relationship between the lord named and the jaguar (Fig. 6f). On accession of the next lord of Aguateca, in A.D. 741, the Kin-Jaguar is replaced by a turtle-glyph, which is one of the designations of the lords of Piedras Negras. One may note that this is the very year when the jaguar-protector motif was carved at Piedras Negras, but whether this fact has any relevance is not at all clear to me.

So far, I have been unable to untangle the obscure connections between the jaguar glyphs and the "protector" motif. What may be significant about them is that all the associated dates seem to belong to that period known as "The Period of Uniformity," when many elements of costume and artistic style, formerly local, became widely dispersed through the Maya area, and when all large cities adopted a uniform lunar count. A. V. Kidder once remarked that only under the pressure of political unification is such agreement among a group of clerics conceivable. Perhaps the ubiquitous jaguars of this period hold some clue to the nature of this unification. Is it possible that the lords of Yaxchilan, a city whose militant battle scenes are unique in Maya sculpture, succeeded in subjecting to their will such

great and ancient cities of the Peten as Tikal and Piedras Negras, or is it merely that they incorporated in their proper names the designation of a widespread lineage? Was there some political or military alliance that took the name of the jaguar, with member states denoted by varying prefixes?

Such speculation, unfortunately, is just as likely as not to lead us astray. What is needed now is some new fact: perhaps no more than one clarified date, perhaps an observation of some small detail on the sculptures, or some relation between them that has escaped notice. Sooner or later, someone is bound to come upon this crucial little fact that will solve the enigma of the jaguars, and we can take another step forward in the interpretation of Maya texts.

In the meantime, some scholars hold that it won't be long before the electronic computer will solve all the major problems of glyphic decipherment and put our present efforts to shame. One experiment has already been made in Russia, but its results are not published, and its success is therefore still unknown. Much will depend on the validity of the assumptions concerning the nature of Maya writing on which the programming was based. It is not at all certain that a completely linguistic rendering of hieroglyphic passages is possible, but even if it is, we may still be far from understanding their meaning, for known Maya texts of Colonial date, written in Roman characters, are replete with metaphors and allusions completely incomprehensible to us. I hope that no one, relying on the marvels of modern invention, will be deterred from pursuing the more laborious method of minute simultaneous scrutiny of texts and sculptures, which is the only way we can make sure that any reading proposed in the future does in fact express the intention of the text. Even if our most optimistic hopes are fulfilled, the full understanding of Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions will require many years of effort. However, if it is true that they contain history and narrative, we may expect ultimately to gain a far more intimate knowledge of the social and political aspects of Maya life than, until now, we have dared to anticipate, and it will be exciting to explore various paths by which we might approach this goal. 2