

End of an Era – Beginning of a New Era

A community of highly knowledgeable specialists interested in Mayan studies now exists, along with many more individuals who participate at a moderate intensity. Some have made this a second career. To assure a solid future for this community, treated as an international resource, we almost certainly need to think together and pro-actively. These are the subjects of this essay, attempting to put it in the widest perspective.

Part 1. – Some changes affecting the study of Mayan culture, history, and writing

For many reasons, the field of Maya studies is changing. Mayans themselves are taking an ever greater role in the field, co-ordinating their workshops and teaching within Guatemala and Mexico, attending the European WAYEB meetings, getting advanced degrees, working with their own documents and history, and attending the Austin Maya Meetings (this last supported mainly thanks to efforts of Sue Glenn and other participants in those meetings, and through waiver of registration fees by UTAustin for Maya attending those meetings). Much of the ground for this was prepared years ago in the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín and in the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas and other organizations, in knowledge by Maya of the richness of Mayan grammars and vocabularies. Many individuals have helped to bridge language barriers (for example Kathryn Josserand fostering Spanish-language sessions at Palenque Roundtables). Linda Schele and Nikolai Grube and others led glyph workshops tailored to Maya, and Erik Velásquez-García and others now do so. Bridges are growing stronger between the study of Maya written documents and archaeological findings.

There are now more professional Mayanists employed at academic institutions in the USA and in Europe, with some increases in Latin America as well (perhaps especially and earliest in archaeology?). There are many bright and promising younger scholars already doing very good work in epigraphy and beyond.

The history of our community owes of course much to Linda Schele, who brought together people from diverse backgrounds to converse across points of view, specializations, and initial skills. People new to the field have made substantial contributions, such as John Montgomery whose drawings have been used in numerous publications by the highest-ranked professionals. Through the meetings and the library of materials she made available to everyone via Kinko's, Linda jump-started the field. But there are major changes.

New decipherments of individual glyphs come more rarely now, because glyphs still not understood are rarer ones in texts. But we can now do more with literary structure of texts, with history, and variations in glyph usage across time and space. These require changes in how many people think about Mayan texts.

The internet has changed the nature of information flow. Many resources are available via the FAMSI web site, via Mesoweb, and via a large number of personal and semi-institutional web sites. We have both Michael Ruggieri's and Erik Boot's electronic notifications of news and resources. The AZTLAN email discussion list has matured: it is now moderated so discussions cannot stray too far from the facts, yet the three quite different moderators (a university president, a retired professor, and an advanced graduate student) keep it open and inclusive. Randa Marhenke has helped to make electronic documents better known and more accessible. Much of the history of discovery is now available via these and other sources. Institutional Libraries are increasingly making documents available electronically which once required visits to those libraries to work with originals. The complete Popol Vuh text is now available in facsimile, in transcription, in word-for-word analysis, and in translation, even with an oral presentation in modern K'iché', in co-ordinated print and electronic publications by Allen Christenson. Many people are moving towards electronic personal libraries carried on their portable computers in addition to physical books or instead of them. We can probably not yet envision how we will be working even ten years from now.

Publishing is also changing. Some professionals have urged more electronic publication. This is of obvious value to consumers of the information including fellow professionals, and of value to the producers of information in wider distribution of their work, but it may not always be in the short-term interests of particular producers. If they cannot get income from publication, do we have a subtle shift in favor of those whose income is guaranteed by other means? Will this decrease the diversity of sources of publication? Will it become more often the norm to charge a cost for electronic information? Other questions we have not thought of asking? All technological changes entail some shifts in relative advantages. There have been a few on-line discussions of this.

There are increasing numbers of meetings for those with Mayan or Mesoamerican or Pre-Columbian interests, beyond those directed more at professionals such as the SAA and AAA societies and the NE and Midwest Andeanists, NE and Midwest Mesoamericanists, and the Institute for Andean studies. For yearly meetings we can name the Austin Maya Meetings (early March in 2009), Philadelphia Maya Weekend (early April), WAYEB (Europe in early December 2008), Tulane (New Orleans, Louisiana in February), Irvine California (October), Washington DC (September), Harvard Peabody (October) and others. In the past there were also UCLA (Los Angeles, California) and K'inil Winik (every other year in Cleveland, Ohio).

Part 2. Some changes affecting the yearly Maya meetings in Austin

This essay was stimulated by recent comments from various meeting participants, and by David Stuart's explicit comments in the Sourcebook for the 2008 Austin Maya Meetings that there are many changes from earlier years. I hope he and others will regard it as a productive way of taking up this topic. David's introductory paragraph is given at the end. Inevitably, in periods of change, there are adjustments. Some things we took for granted are no longer there. New opportunities arise and we do not all take advantage of them equally quickly. So what follows focuses first on recent Austin meetings, and then goes on to other developments.

The Maya Meetings in Austin have changed. Since many years now, starting already while Linda was still alive, it was no longer permissible to have a large library of unpublished materials available to copy at Kinko's. More recently, Phil Wanyerka's transcripts are no longer published. Intellectual control of images is becoming increasingly more rigid, and that can cause severe problems.

The content of the Saturday-Sunday weekend in Austin in 2008 was appropriate more for a general audience than for those interested in the latest discoveries presented in a manner which invites participation. (The 2008 meetings were originally intended to have a 3-hour presentation of the Copan Hieroglyphic Stairway inscription, with the project drawings of the entire stairway to be included in the Sourcebook, at least 50 pages. In the end that was not possible.) Changes in meeting content are not simply a matter of distinguishing those most interested in glyphs from those interested in wider concerns. They are much more complex. The four-day workshops did continue this year, under the very capable leadership of Harri Kettunen and Nick Carter (beginners), Eric Boot and Alex Tokovinine (intermediate), Marc Zender (advanced glyphs), Bruce Love (Yucatan), Justin Kerr (pots), and with a new special workshop for those interested in textiles led by Bárbara Knoke de Aranthoon (Museo Ixchel de Traje Indígena, Guatemala City) and Beatrice L. Thomas. Some of the names above are a bit new to parts of our Mayanist community, and along with the long-time presences, are a good sign. The space assigned to these workshops was not as ample as in earlier years, acoustic interference between groups all in the same room was a problem, and lighting could not be adjusted for separate groups to support projection of images. We can hope that these workshops will still be highly valued in the future, and that physical, financial, and social support for them will improve in comparison to what it was this year. Starting in 2009, the plan is to have the workshops and meetings in the new ATT Conference Center. To be able to use it in 2009, the meeting dates have to be slightly adjusted, to run February 23 to March 1.

The Sourcebook this year did not include a duplicate of the general introduction to Mayan glyphic studies. That is still available in copies of earlier workbooks, available for purchase. This is a good change, which saves trees and weight of unneeded paper. It recognizes that there is now more knowledge of glyphic texts among a wider public than before, and that the regular attendees of the Austin meetings already have the basic materials. In addition, David Stuart and Danny Law are co-authoring a book containing this material, to be published by the Univ. of Texas Press. After 2009, it will be available in that published form.

The Sourcebook did contain materials relative to the focus this year: maps, chronology, Summary facts on Copan Rulers, a drawing of the iconography on the Rosalila Temple by Barbara Fash, a drawing by David Stuart of the Temple Inscription from Copan Structure 10L-26-1st, the one which has glyphs both in Maya style and in Central Mexican style (but still Maya language), selected readings on Copan, and a table of dates from Copan inscriptions. All of these are useful for those who are most active in our Mayanist community, and will reward continued work. Some parts of them have not been easily available.

But almost none of these materials were discussed in the talks presented on the weekend. The part of those talks which was of most interest to many traditional participants in Austin was probably the long

discussion of the Copan Hieroglyphic Stairs by David Stuart and Bill and Barbara Fash. We got a lot of context of the history of the stairs from Barbara, how old photographs and meagre excavation records have enabled the positions of some blocks to be determined, and enabled the order of the text to be re-arranged. But we got no specifics on what elements of the text had been re-arranged, or how this might affect our understanding of Copan's history. David Stuart presented an overview of the discourse structure of the Hieroglyphic Stairs text at the highest level, the subject matter of different sections each of many steps, and those of us who took good notes may be able to work with this, but with considerable difficulty. None of this was in the Sourcebook. These higher-level divisions of the text were not linked to the specific glyphic texts in any way which we could take home with us and work with. This is a second area where we can hope for more effective presentation of information in the future.

Part 3. The nature of presentations at yearly symposia in Austin and Philadelphia

Other speakers during the 2008 weekend in Austin considered a number of topics which are interesting, but did not treat the audience as participants, nor did they obviously interact with each other in enlightening ways. Rather they treated the audience as a typical very general audience, to sit and enjoy a series of lectures but not to be challenged to think and contribute to the field. In this respect they failed to take advantage of the very special audience which traditionally has attended the Austin meetings, the "community" which is a concern of this essay. In the long run, this kind of change can be self-reinforcing, as the type of audience which attends will change as a result if our minds are not "fed" well when there. (Choices made in this regard may reflect a conscious decision to avoid what happened one year in the past, when presentations were too highly technical linguistically and thus not appropriate to the audience in an opposite way. For the most part, it was not the content but the presentation which was a problem that year. Neither extreme is the answer for the kinds of very knowledgeable audiences we have had in the past – and respect for the intelligence and active participation of the audience is probably the most crucial basis for success – along with unusual abilities to explain technical matters to an audience which has very substantial knowledge but which does not share all the background of speakers nor the technical jargon which even for professionals often interferes with clear thinking rather than supporting it. (A "need for technical terminology" is probably a red herring, and is never an excuse for poor presentation.)

The problem of getting speakers at symposia, and the task for organizers of symposia, to offer more real substance, is a much more general one, not peculiar to the Austin meetings. We have had such an exceptional situation in Austin for so long that we have taken it for granted. Now we face the prospect that the Austin meetings may become more like meetings elsewhere, less unusual and special in their information content. A similar problem affects our news media in general, they do not expect citizens to think about politics, so they present little which encourages thinking or which would make it rewarding. That becomes a self-reinforcing tendency to reduce thinking, creating the very situation about which some in the news media complain.

We need to be supportive of symposium organizers everywhere, while yet attempting to hold them to high standards. To produce really good programs, organizers need to work with speakers to get speakers to be clearer and more effective, to use lots of visuals but not to the exclusion of analysis, rather in support of it, to include more substance, to explain reasoning substantially rather than merely asserting. This can be hard to do if speakers do not have these skills. It is definitely one responsibility of organizers to constantly nudge and help speakers to improve. And occasionally to exclude speakers if they do not measure up well enough. The purpose of symposia should not be to honor speakers by inclusion. The paying customers for symposia are the audiences. Even beyond this, it is the responsibility of organizers to put together programs in which speakers will interact well, will have interesting things to say to each other in the presence of the audience, will deal with important questions even if they do not yet have definitive answers. The obligation here is to society at large, because society invests substantial resources and subsidies into academic and museum institutions. We should not waste any of our efforts by failing to get multiple benefits from each opportunity. Meetings are expensive.

Recent meetings in Austin and in Philadelphia have presented more information than was previously customary about climate, the ecosystem, the human cultural context, struggles for land rights, sustainable agriculture, and other topics where we can theoretically both learn about the past and think usefully about the present and future. But these have been exceedingly general, lacking in specific substance. We can regard this

as a challenge and an opportunity. It may take some time for these new efforts to bear fruit, and for such meetings to contain more real substance and be more inviting of audience becoming real participants in efforts in these areas rather than being merely passive listeners. How do we accomplish this? How do we give the most useful feedback to organizers of such meetings? The Sourcebook for the 2008 Austin meetings did not contain any materials to support this side of the meetings, nor did handouts for the Maya Weekend in Philadelphia. Such might have included concise tables of population densities through time estimated for parts of the Mayan area or for Mesoamerica, or the latest information on climate change with a history of serious droughts affecting the Maya, or summaries of pollen count evidence for type of land use through time, or histories of land ownership and struggles for land rights in more recent times, or surveys of biological populations (plants, animals), or discussion of methods for combatting the burning of forests to produce landing strips for drug traffickers, or any tools for measuring our losses or our progress on any measures of these sorts of things which we care about.

Recently what we have seen at these meetings has not been simply a shift away from support for our Mayanist community. Rather it has been a shift away from real substance.

Part 4. Strengthening our Mayanist community

Getting back to our Mayanist community in particular, composed now of Maya and of Latin Americans, Anglo Americans, Europeans and others – It should be treated as what it is, an international resource to be fed and cared for because of what it produces. It should not be treated as just a special-interest portion of an audience. Some may not be fully aware of what this community has produced. As in other communities, we need to value this, and perhaps we should compile a list of glyph analyses and decipherments, text analyses, and other significant contributions to understanding history and culture which have been made by this community over the years, along with ways in which this community has helped a number of individuals to get started in glyphic and cultural studies and gradually to become more professional in them. Any accounting of contributions is a delicate thing to attempt in any one place, because of the sensitivity of inclusions and exclusions, but probably it can be done reasonably. The on-line bibliography at FAMSI is helpful here.

We can also strengthen our communications further, make resources more easily available, improve ways we teach about Mayan cultures, languages, glyphic readings, and decipherments, and better support the concerns of Maya people of the present day. It is crucial to the feeding and care of our Mayanist community that we do many of these things well. We almost certainly need to take an active role in this for the future. If we assume it will be done for us by others, that we do not have to take care of it ourselves, then we leave ourselves very vulnerable to losing what we have. Constant care is needed.

Please suggest any concrete actions we can take to strengthen our community and the field of Mayan studies. Some of the best and most clearly and concisely expressed ideas can be posted here.

Appendix:

Here follows David Stuart's introductory paragraph noting changes in the Maya Meetings in Austin (from the 2008 Sourcebook). He kindly supplied some additional information presented in several places in this essay.

"The 2008 Sourcebook represents an important change from earlier years. It's noticeably shorter, and omits the lengthy section presenting an overview of Maya glyphs and grammar – versions of which dated back to Linda Schele's first workshops in the 1970's. The simple reason for this is that the Maya Meetings themselves are changing and reflecting new trends in the study and presentation of Maya archaeology and history. No longer are the Austin gatherings only for "glyphers," where inscriptions are read glyph-by-glyph and new decipherments are presented. While some of our four-day workshops will always involve those exciting activities, the UT Maya Meetings now encompass a wider array of interests, approaches and perspectives that reflect the maturation of Maya archaeology and research world-wide. And the welcome participation of Maya friends from Mexico and Guatemala bring the conference very much into the world of today, broadening our perspectives even further, without question for the better. So, our Sourcebook now reflects a more general use and appeal, and includes an assortment of maps, charts, and information that might prove useful for all attendees during many of the workshops and lectures."