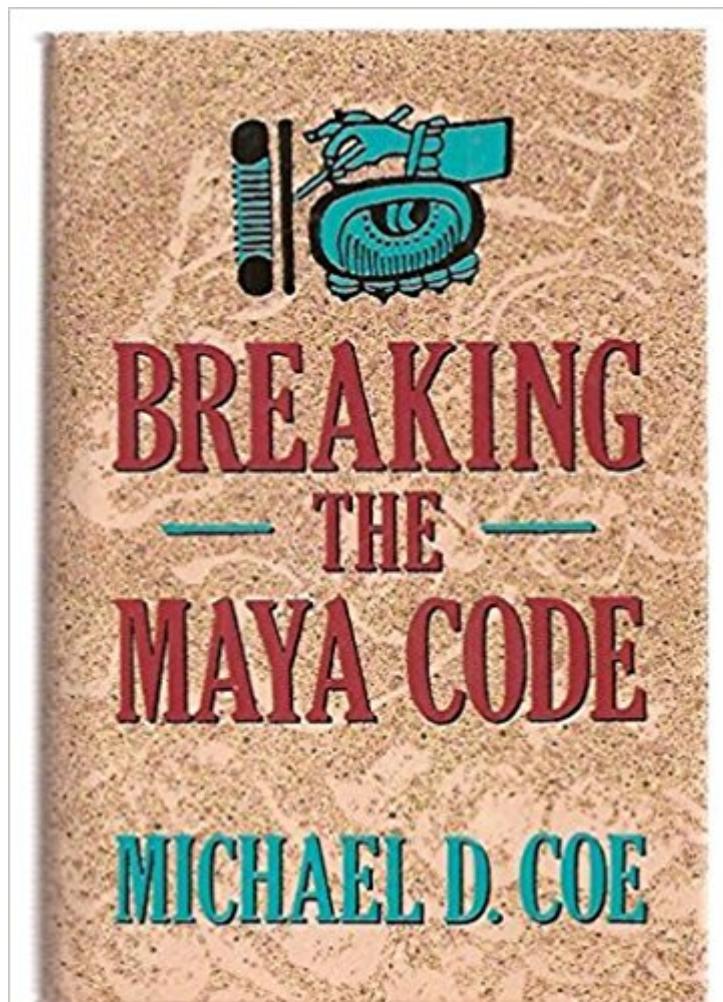


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# Breaking The Maya Code



## Synopsis

Thanks to an extraordinary scientific breakthrough, Mayan monuments are revealing a history lost to humanity for a millennium. Coe gives the inside story of the decipherment of Mayan glyphs, portraying the Maya as a complex civilization, obsessed with warfare, dynastic rivalries, and ritual bloodletting, yet creators of supreme masterpieces in art and architecture. Illustrations.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 304 pages

Publisher: Thames & Hudson; Revised ed. edition (October 1992)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0500050619

ISBN-13: 978-0500050613

Product Dimensions: 1.5 x 6.5 x 9.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 59 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #619,347 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #209 in Books > History > Americas > Canada > First Nations #321 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Mythology & Folk Tales > Folklore #1417 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Archaeology

## Customer Reviews

The decipherment of the Maya script was, Coe states, "one of the most exciting intellectual adventures of our age, on a par with the exploration of space and the discovery of the genetic code." He presents the story eloquently and in detail, with many illustrations of the mysterious Maya inscriptions and the people who tried to decipher them. Most of the credit, he says, goes to the late Yuri V. Knorosov of the Russian Institute of Ethnography, but many others participated. They did not always agree, and some of them went up blind alleys. Coe--emeritus professor of anthropology at Yale University--vividly describes the battles, missteps and successes. What is now established, he writes, is that "the Maya writing system is a mix of logograms and syllabic signs; with the latter, they could and often did write words purely phonetically." Coe concludes with a swipe at "dirt archaeologists" who believe the decipherment of Maya writing "is not worthy of notice." According to them, he asserts, "the Maya inscriptions are 'epiphenomenal,' a ten-penny word meaning that Maya writing is only of marginal application since it is secondary to those more primary institutions--economy and society--so well studied by the dirt archaeologists." Coe sees that attitude

as "sour grapes" and ascribes it to "the inability or unwillingness of anthropologically trained archaeologists to admit that they are dealing with the remains of real people, who once lived and spoke." --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A fluent, engaging, and informative account of the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphics. -- Publishers Weekly A great story told clearly and passionately by a great Mayanist. It's an inspiring example of the ultimate triumph of truth in the knockdown, drag-out world of academic politics. -- Science As good an introduction to the world of the Maya, and of the Maya scholars, as one is likely to get. -- USA Today Combines impeccable scholarship with an unpretentious spirit--that is a rare feat indeed. -- Library Journal One of the great stories of twentieth-century scientific discovery.... Rich in personal, even intimate, details, the book reads at times like a novel. It is well calculated to keep aficionados of Maya culture on the edges of their seats. -- The New York Times --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book provides a thorough discussion of the progress...and regressions...in the decryption of Mayan writing. I read it after finishing Margalit Fox's new book on the deciphering of Egyptian writing. Both were fascinating discussions of the processes involved in the task and the missteps of the investigators. And both make real the unattractive side of academia...selfishness over sources, the cult of personality, and the reluctance to consider new evidence and theories. Some reviewers commented negatively on these points, but they are all part of discovery...think of the battles over access to the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the prolonged rejection of plate tectonics, asteroids destroying dinosaurs, and birds evolving from dinosaurs. The process is as interesting as the result! I think Professor Coe was very evenhanded in his telling of the story.

Riveting, fascinating, I learned new things on every page. Haven't finished it yet and am looking forward to the rest of the book.

This is a fascinating book and a good read. I remember the National Geographic articles from the 1950's when the Mayan Temples with their indecipherable glyphs were being discovered in the jungles. It was very interesting how Cold War politics interfered with the recognition of a Russian scholar who made the 'big breakthrough' in the decipherment as he was painted (better 'tainted') with the 'tar brush of Soviet pseudo-science.' After reading this, you will want to read 'The Decipherment of Linear B' by John Chadwick and 'Cracking the Egyptian Code: The Revolutionary

Life of Jean-Francois Champollion' by Andrew Robinson.

good svc

This is a very interesting story told by one of the principal players. The book gets rather technical at times, but it's worth the effort. The author has some very strong opinions about his colleagues, but that's all the more fun as an insight into the academic world.

the documentary is great, too

A good story needs a villain. The villain of the book in question is Sir Eric Thompson, who must have been a fascinating figure (in fact I've been looking for some biography of him after reading the present work). Skip the first chapter, which concerns writing systems in general, and you get a hilarious work (perhaps the author had James Watson's "Double Helix" in mind when writing), abounding with anecdotes and gossips of the nasty academic world. Thompson is the arch-villain, but the author's censure on the "field anthropologists" is also severe. The first chapter seems to mar the whole work, which is a bit too long, and is not very accurate. For example, the Chinese writing system doesn't have "214 determinatives" as the author claims (p. 32) -- there're 214 "section headers" in a traditional Chinese dictionary, which were devised by lexicographers, and are not supposed to tell "one the general class of phenomena to which the thing named belongs" (p. 31), although the two concepts have overlapping. Of course these're only minor mistakes, and to them we should not pay too much attention, as the author warns us, unwittingly: "It will be recalled that Thompson dealt posthumously with Whorf by paying no attention whatsoever to Whorf's larger points, and devoting much ink to the latter's minor mistakes (and mistakes they were), like a terrier worrying a rat." (p. 152). All the same, one star has been deducted!

a thorough and intricate book and the writing of the Mayas. Definitely a textbook for the next class i teach.

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