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# Treasure Seekers: Code of the Maya Kings

By Ann Carroll

Code of Maya Kings

They would tantalize explorers  
for hundreds of years,  
ruined cities lost in the jungles  
of Central America and Mexico.  
Inscrutable faces etched in stone.  
Mysterious writing.

Who had left these messages  
from the past?

It would take more than a century to  
unlock the secrets of the ancient Maya.

Two extraordinary people  
would lead the way.

Separated by 100 years,  
they would unveil one of the greatest  
mysteries of archeology.

Code of Maya Kings

Chichen Itza, Mexico 1842.

An American lawyer named  
John Lloyd Stephens  
wanders the empty ruins  
looking for clues.

He knows what he wants to find.

It has kept him going  
through two harrowing journeys,  
exploring the desolate jungles  
of Central America.

Kept him pushing on  
through mud and malaria,  
poisonous snakes, and insect-plagued  
nights under the stars.

Stephens, the lawyer,  
was looking for proof,  
undeniable evidence that these ruins  
were not built by the Egyptians  
or the Phoenicians or the Lost Tribes  
of Israel.

And here at Chichen Itza he thinks  
that he's found it at least.

Writing unlike that of  
any other civilization he knows.

The same writing he'd seen at other  
ruined cities hundreds of miles away.

Proof of an ancient empire

of Native Americans  
more sophisticated than anyone  
believed possible.  
Stephens himself was a product of  
the New World.  
He was born in 1805, the son of  
a wealthy New York merchant.  
The city wasn't much more than  
a Dutch village,  
but it was the hub of a new nation.  
Stephens grew up  
along the Hudson River  
watching the ships come in  
from around the world.  
After reading law,  
he opened a practice on Wall Street.  
Soon he got into politics,  
campaigning vigorously for  
Andrew Jackson for President.  
But months of shouting to the crowds  
gave him a serious throat infection.  
His doctor prescribed a common remedy  
for wealthy young men-  
a grand tour of Europe.  
The ancient ruins of Italy and Greece  
only piqued his curiosity.  
Stephens went on to Egypt,  
and spent three months  
floating up the Nile,  
visiting the temples and monuments  
along the way.  
Only a decade before a Frenchman  
had deciphered the hieroglyphs,  
revealing the rich history  
of Egypt's kings and queens.  
Stephens was fascinated,  
and he still wasn't ready to go home.  
He'd seen pictures of  
a fantastic ancient city in Arabia,  
lost for century to all  
but the Bedouins.  
Everyone told him the journey was too  
perilous for an unaccompanied American,  
so Stephens disguised himself

as a Turkish merchant  
and took the name Abul Hassis.  
In 1836, John Lloyd Stephens  
was the first American to set eyes  
on the ruins of Petra.  
In Roman times it had been one of  
the greatest cities of the East.  
Stephens still found it dazzling:  
"A temple delicate and limpid,  
carved like a cameo  
from a solid mountain wall,  
the first view  
of that superb facade  
must produce an effect  
which will never pass away."  
Stephens letters home  
were so vivid and imaginative,  
they were published  
in a monthly magazine.  
Soon, he was writing books recounting  
his exotic adventures around the world.  
The lawyer had become  
a literary sensation.  
He was a seasoned observer,  
he was an incredible observer.  
In fact, Herman Melville  
of Moby Dick fame, recalled one time  
when he was in church,  
Herman Melville was, he was a kid.  
He heard that Stephens  
was in the front row.  
And when Stephens left,  
Melville writes,  
"I thought this man must have great  
huge eyes that bulged through his head,  
he was such a good observer,"  
because Melville had read his stuff.  
Back in New York the life  
of a sedentary lawyer  
no longer held any charm for Stephens.  
Instead, his mind was filled with  
thoughts of another journey,  
not so far away, but even more  
remote and daring.

On his way home through London,  
he met an artist named  
Rederick Catherwood  
who'd spent ten  
years in the Near East.  
They shared their interest  
in exotic travel.  
Sensing a kindred spirit, Catherwood  
had showed him a curious book  
about a lost city in Central America  
hidden in the jungle.  
The book's authors thought  
the fabulous ruins of Palenque  
had been built by Egyptians,  
Carthaginians, maybe even  
the Lost Tribes of Israel.  
Anyone but the Native Americans.  
There was sort of a racism in here  
that said that  
everything great had come  
through the Greeks, the Egyptians,  
through the European tradition.  
And anything different  
appeared relatively  
to be a bunch of naked savages  
wandering through the woods.  
In 1839, no one believed  
the Native Americans  
capable of building  
a sophisticated civilization.  
Stephens' own government  
had little use for them.  
Only a year earlier  
they had uprooted thousands of Indians,  
sending them westward  
along the infamous Trail of Tears.  
The thought of a great ancient  
civilization in Central America  
seemed even more preposterous.  
A few travelers had reported  
sighting ruined cities like Palenque,  
but Stephens could find  
none of them on the map.  
It was a travel writer's dream,

but only this time  
he would have to bring back  
evidence of whatever he found.  
But who better to accompany him  
than the artist Frederick Catherwood,  
now practicing architecture  
in New York?  
Only one small problem remained,  
the newly formed  
Central American Federation  
was fighting a bitter civil war.  
Using his political connections,  
Stephens secured a post  
as a Confidential Agent.  
He figured his diplomatic coat would  
protect him in dangerous territory.  
So in October 1839,  
Catherwood bid farewell to  
his wife and two young boys,  
and now they were here,  
deep in the jungles of Central America.  
The ruins of Copan was  
their first goals.  
But when they found  
the little village of the same name,  
no one there had ever heard  
of nearby ruins.  
Finally, a knowledgeable Indian  
offered to guide them.  
But that was hours ago.  
Now they were beginning to think that  
the ruins were nothing but a legend.  
When suddenly, there they were,  
grander than their wildest dreams,  
the Ruins of Copan.  
Pyramids rose majestically  
out of the jungle.  
Great stone faces peered at them  
from intricately carved monuments,  
twice the size of a man.  
Stephens noticed hieroglyphs  
and judged them  
to be as fine  
as any he'd seen in Egypt,

yet his experience told him  
that these carvings were unique.  
The silence of the once  
majestic city overwhelmed him:  
Copan lay before us like a shattered  
bark in the midst of the ocean,  
her masts gone, her crew perished,  
and none to tell whence she came.  
I think the description of Copan  
is the single most poetic description  
of a place he visits,  
for it is though he is walking  
around inside the Titanic,  
and he's looking at the shipwreck  
of a civilization.  
He walks from monument to monument.  
It is through he's looking into  
the faces of those  
who have recently been  
ruling this place:  
America, say historians,  
was peopled by savages.  
But savages never reared  
these structures,  
savages never carved these stones,  
architecture, sculpture and painting,  
all the arts which embellish life,  
had flourished  
in this overgrown forest,  
and yet none knew that  
such things had been,  
or could tell of  
their past existence.  
He's the first who is  
really able to say,  
Look at these stone figures;  
these must be portraits of  
their kings and queens.  
And he uses the word queen  
which is really quite astonishing,  
in seeing men and women in the  
monuments, for 100 years later,  
all the men and women that Stephens  
saw will have been reduced

by 20th century archeologists to  
a group of anonymous calendar priests.  
Stephens has this kind of Yankee  
can-do observation.  
The best part of many of  
Stephens' insights is that  
they prove to be absolutely true.  
Yet Stephens was deeply puzzled  
by the mystery at the heart of Copan.  
Who could have built  
this extraordinary city?  
The local Indians didn't seem to know.  
Stephens needed their help  
to explore the ruins,  
but the owner of the land interfered.  
Finally, it seemed that the only  
solution was to buy Copan.  
So the lawyer put on  
his diplomatic coat,  
and went to the village to negotiate.  
You are perhaps curious to know  
how old ruins sell in Central America.  
I paid \$50 for Copan.  
There was never any difficulty  
about price.  
I offered that sum, for which  
Don Jose Maria thought me only a fool.  
If I had offered more,  
he would probably have considered me  
something worse.  
Ownership settled, the team set about  
surveying the ruined city,  
measuring and mapping its buildings.  
Catherwood is a remarkable  
character as well.  
I wish we knew more about him.  
One gains some sense of the  
Stephens personality,  
just from the written word.  
The Catherwood personality  
doesn't emerge much.  
Stephens treats him very formally,  
and he appears as Mr. Catherwood.  
At first Mr. Catherwood found it

almost impossible to draw the monuments.  
Their tropical luxuriance defied  
his restrained British hand.  
Stephens mentions coming upon him  
in the woods one day.  
Catherwood is standing in front of  
a big upright monument.  
It is a statute of one of the Copan  
rulers, and all intricately carved.  
Catherwood's standing there almost  
obscured by a pile of crumpled paper,  
which represents the output so far  
that day of unsuccessful attempts  
to draw this thing.  
Fortunately, Catherwood had  
brought along a camera lucida a box  
with a prism inside which allowed him  
to trace a reflected image.  
To please the perfectionist  
Mr. Catherwood,  
every detail had to be correct.  
With the coming of Spring,  
they were ready to begin  
the search for the next great goal,  
Palenque.  
The territory to the north,  
through the Sierra Madras Mountains,  
was wild and uncharted.  
As one local said, the road to  
Palenque were only for birds.  
Snakes and clouds of mosquitoes  
dogged their steps.  
To Stephens the worst part was  
the local custom of carry a visitor up  
the steepest trail on a chair,  
strapped to the back of an Indian.  
I rose and fell with every breath,  
felt his body trembling under me,  
and his knees seemed giving way.  
The slightest irregular movement on my  
part may bring us both down together.  
I would have given him a release  
for the rest of the journey  
to be off his back.

On and on they traveled.  
It took more than a month  
to reach the fabled ruins  
that had first inspired their journey.  
Palenque seemed to hang on  
the edge of the mountains.  
It's graceful buildings dominating  
the plain below.  
Wherever we moved,  
we saw the evidence of their tastes,  
their skills in arts,  
their wealth and power.  
In the midst of desolation and ruin,  
we looked back to the past,  
cleared away the gloomy forest  
and fancied every building perfect,  
lofty and imposing.  
Palenque's architecture  
was different from Copan's,  
but Stephens noticed many similarities,  
particularly the mysterious writings.  
Examining it carefully,  
he reached a remarkable conclusion:  
There is room for the belief that  
the whole of this country  
was once occupied by the same race,  
speaking the same language,  
or at least having the same  
written characters.  
The Indians Stephens met  
spoke many languages  
and were as mystified  
by the ruins as he was.  
Yet, intuitively, Stephens seemed  
to sense a link between them.  
Stephens, I think, is the first person  
who can make the connection  
between the Indians that he sees  
and meets and the ancient ruins.  
Whereas other people want to say,  
oh, these pathetic peasants,  
these miserable Indians,  
they could never have built this.  
We must look for some

alternative solution  
to where these things  
would have come from.  
He believes that here  
is complete continuity.  
And that, I think, is one of the most  
radical ideas to come out of his book.  
At night, Stephens and Catherwood  
slept in the imposing ruin  
they called The Palace.  
The rainy season had begun,  
and the mosquitoes,  
venomous during the day,  
were even worse at night.  
Catherwood was already  
racked with malaria,  
but somehow they kept on working,  
for 22 days and sleepless nights,  
bewitched by the beauty of Palenque.  
Exhausted, they pushed on,  
further north and east to the Yucatan,  
but Catherwood was too ill  
to continue.  
Vowing to return,  
they headed home to New York.  
In 10 months the two explorers  
had accomplished the impossible.  
They had rediscovered an ancient  
American civilization grander  
than anyone had ever dreamed.  
Now they were ready to  
astound the world with its story.  
Stephens's books was incredible popular  
when it appeared in the summer of 1841,  
Incidents of Travel  
in Central America,  
Chiapas, and Yucatan.  
Harper and Brothers had printed up  
a goodly print run,  
and it sold out pretty quickly.  
Stephens writes a real page-turner.  
It is such a personal view,  
and it becomes one of the great  
bestsellers of the entire 19th century.

It goes through dozens of editions.  
And there is an enormous American  
desire to know more about  
this part of the world.  
They were lionized  
after the publication.  
They were quite the thing  
in New York.  
It was reviewed everywhere.  
Just an amazing publication epic,  
so the trip was a success  
and they planned to go again.  
Seventeen months after they'd left Mexico,  
Stephens and Catherwood  
were back in the Yucatan,  
exploring the city of Uxmal.  
On this second journey,  
they concentrated their efforts  
on this one region of Mexico.  
Inching their way through the jungle,  
they discovered many ruined cities  
entirely unknown, with names  
like Coba, Labna, and Sayil.  
Stephens felt they were  
racing against time.  
Everywhere they went, they found  
ruins collapsing into piles of rubble.  
Catherwood even learned how to sketch  
from his mule to save time.  
At Uxmal, the artist drew the face of  
a god on the side of a pyramid.  
Years later, it was destroyed.  
Catherwood's illustration is  
our only record of it.  
They performed the greatest service,  
perhaps, in freezing in time  
a set of observations  
and images of a land that  
no longer exists.  
They're romantic pictures,  
yet at the same time  
they're remarkably accurate.  
Many of Catherwood's renderings,  
for examples, of the Maya at Uxmal

and Magna and other sites  
are the first depictions  
that we have of what Mayan people  
looked like.

We had no earlier record.

In the town of Balankanche,  
the explorers visited  
an ancient well deep underground.

Catherwood was so inspired,  
he began his memorable sketch  
at the foot of the ladder.  
It was the wildest setting  
that could be conceived,  
men struggling up a huge ladder  
with earthen jars of water  
strapped to back and head,  
their sweating bodies glistening  
under the light of the pine torches.

One of the last places they explored  
was Chichen Itza.

Its architecture moved them more than  
any other city on this second journey.  
Most exciting of all was the revelation  
that this city had been linked  
to Copan and Palenque hundred  
of miles away.

It was the first time in Yucatan  
that we had found hieroglyphics  
sculptured on stone  
which beyond all question  
bore the same type  
with those at Copan and Palenque.

If one but could read it.

Finally, Stephens felt he had the  
proof he'd been looking for.

The mysterious writing was unique,  
unlike any he'd ever seen.

Now he could convince the skeptics  
that the ruined cities had been built  
by Native Americans.

These ruins are different than the  
works of any other known people.

Of a new order, they stand alone.

In the nine months

of their second journey,  
Stephens and Catherwood managed  
to visit 44 ruined cities.  
And gather some treasures for  
an exhibit on their return.  
But they paid a heavy price  
for their adventures.  
Malaria would haunt both men  
for the rest of their lives.  
John Lloyd Stephens would fight  
the dread disease for ten years  
before succumbing to it in 1852.  
Frederick Catherwood  
would die tragically  
a few years later in a shipwreck.  
This is the only image we have of him.  
For there was another sad chapter  
to their story.  
The fate of the great exhibition  
they held on their return to New York.  
This fire started one night  
in July of 1842,  
and literally overnight it wiped out  
the physical originals-  
The drawings,  
some of the archeological stuff,  
the limestone carvings they had  
brought back at great labor.  
Thank goodness for the books.  
And I thank the Fates everyday  
that somebody at Harper and Brothers  
Publishers in New York  
had the foresight to heavily  
illustrate the book,  
because what a shame  
if the drawings had been lost.  
Fortunately, before he died,  
Catherwood issued exquisite folios  
of some of the drawings.  
They inspired generations of  
explores to follow the intrepid pair  
to the land of the Maya.  
But Stephens' insights would have  
a different fate.

His greatest intuition-that  
the Maya had written the real stories  
of their lives on the monuments-  
would be ignored.  
The legions of archeologists  
who came after him were able  
to decipher some of the glyphs,  
but only those that spoke of numbers,  
dates and the stars.  
Carried away by the discovery that the  
ancient Maya were great astronomers,  
archeologists fashioned a picture  
of them as peaceful stargazers,  
obsessed with calendars and time.  
When John Lloyd Stephens  
had looked at the monuments,  
he had seen real kings and queens.  
One hundred years later,  
archeologists saw only the calculations  
of anonymous timekeepers.  
It would take a fresh set of eyes  
to finally unravel the secrets of Maya  
carvings and prove that  
Stephens was right.  
The story of Tatiana Proskouriakoff  
is not well known  
outside the realm of Maya studies.  
Yet, in that field she is a giant,  
a woman in a man's world  
who saw further  
and deeper than her  
more famous contemporaries.  
What we know of  
the ancient Maya today,  
the exciting revelations emerging  
from dozens of excavations  
is built on her work.  
Speaking of Copan, she was the first  
to describe its ruins as a puzzle.  
She was the one who supplied  
the missing piece.  
Tatiana, or Tanya,  
as her friends called her,  
was born in Tomsk,

Siberia in 1909.

Her mother, the daughter of a prominent general, was a physician.

Her father, a chemist.

World War I shattered their peaceful existence.

In 1915, Tanya's father was sent to the United States to supervise arms manufacturing for the czar.

With the coming of the Russian Revolution, the family was trapped and began a new life in suburban Philadelphia.

At work on the first biography of Proskouriakoff,

Char Solomon has been uncovering these early details of her life.

Tanya's story is compelling to me because she was born in Russia at such a tumultuous time.

She came to the United States.

She acquired English as a second language, and mastered it in such a way that it became the equivalent of her first language.

She chose a profession that was dominated by men at a time when many women did not choose to go that route.

Tanya majored in architecture at Pennsylvania State University, one of the only women to do so in her graduating class.

It was 1930, the height of the Great Depression.

Tanya spent several dispiriting years looking for work, then settled for a job making drawings for a needlepoint shop.

The search for good subjects led her to the Archeological Museum at the University of Pennsylvania.

Tanya's skillful drawings attracted the attention of Linton Satterwaite, an archeologist looking for an artist to work at his dig, deep in the jungles of Guatemala. The ruined City of Peidras Negras was a big jump from her close-knit Russian family, but Tanya was ready for an adventure. The small party set off for Guatemala in the winter of 1936. On their way, they stopped at Palenque, the graceful ruined city that had captivated the explorers Stephens and Catherwood almost 100 years before. Tanya was equally entranced. She, in older years, said that when she first saw the elegant little Temple of the Sun, she knew she had found her vocation, that there would never be anything else that would get her as much as that. Tanya's pencil responded easily to the intricacies of Maya art. The young Russian American had felt the pulse of an ancient mystery. But settling in the Peidras Negras wasn't easy. Tanya had to learn how to survey and draw the dilapidated ruins. As an outsider, as a woman who had learned a profession and trying to find a way into it, I'm sure she was clearly little Tanya, allowed to sit there with her drafting pen and make observations about Peidras Negras. I think she had to pay for every step she took, but she really, I think, was someone who was able to compete effectively with the boys.

In Mayan archeology in the 1932s,  
'the boys' were  
a pretty formidable bunch.  
This was a group of people  
that came together,  
people from mostly Ivy League,  
Harvard and Penn and other places.  
They were all great friends.  
They were all, as most archeologists  
were at the time,  
people of independent means.  
They could do what  
they darn well pleased.  
Even in the bush these silver-spoon  
archeologists managed to live well.  
At Peidras Negras,  
dinner was a formal occasion,  
beginning with cocktails.  
Somewhere around 5 o'clock  
they would dress,  
and they would dress elegantly.  
Tanya had a white dress,  
full-length dress,  
that she packed along with her.  
She would slough through the mud  
to get to the dining hut,  
and then sort of tuck the muddy bottom  
of her dress down behind her feet,  
so that no one would notice.  
There was a little bit of challenging  
banter also between Tanya and Linton.  
He had suggested that  
one of the structures  
did not have a staircase  
going up one side,  
and she felt strong that  
there would have been  
and challenged him on that point.  
So he said, well,  
if you really believe that  
there was a staircase there,  
then you have to dig and find me  
the proof, which she did.  
And to her delight,

she found the staircase.  
Tanya began to sketch reconstructions  
of the ruins  
based on the archeological data.  
Her drawings were so impressive,  
they earned her a sketching tour  
of other Maya cities.  
Her first stop was Copan.  
Noted Mayanist Ian Graham shared  
an office with Tanya in her later years  
at Harvard's Peabody Museum.  
He remembers her tails of Copan  
in the thirties.  
Anyway, she landed,  
the sole female in this isolated camp.  
There were some fairly  
spirited characters there.  
One was an amazing man  
called Gus Stromsvik.  
Gustav Stromsvik,  
the Norwegian archeologist  
who worked for the  
Carnegie Institution,  
fell deeply in love with her.  
And Tanya had a period  
in which she tried to decide  
what this relationship  
was going to mean in her life.  
Stromsvik was  
a very dynamic personality.  
He was very outgoing.  
He was a raconteur, and she loved  
people who could tell good stories,  
she loved to laugh.  
So she was drawn to him.  
But on the other hand, Stromsvik had  
a very serious drinking problem.  
Particularly on Saturday nights,  
the life there was spent pretty wild.  
Tanya seemed to handle it  
perfectly well.  
It's amazing.  
She led such a protective life  
in her Russian family

and in her suburban life  
in Philadelphia.  
But she had grit.  
Tanya's next stop was Chichen Itza,  
center of the Mayan world  
in this golden age of archeology.  
The ancient city  
was undergoing a renaissance,  
as archeologists from  
the Carnegie Institution  
pieced it back together.  
Half of rebuilding has gone  
hand in hand with the work of  
Welcoming the throngs  
of visitors was the man  
who would serve  
as the spokesman for the Maya  
for more than 20 years,  
Carnegie's Sylvanus Morley,  
known for his oversized straw hats  
and ebullient personality.  
At Chichen Itza,  
he lived in grand style  
in a Spanish colonial manor house.  
Every evening a Chinese cook  
would prepare dinner for Morley  
and his band of archeologists.  
Envious colleagues referred to them  
as the club.  
On special evenings Morley  
would lead his guests to the ruins  
of the Maya ball court for a concert,  
amplified by the court's  
amazing acoustics.  
Tanya would join the others  
in the moonlight in this fitting place  
to conjure the spirits  
of the departed Maya.  
For to the Carnegie Club, the Maya  
were a band of priestly stargazers,  
unlike any other people  
who had ever lived.  
These ancient wise men  
had never fought wars.

Instead, they had spent their time  
inventing an elaborate calendar  
and a system of writing used  
for nothing but recording time.  
The author of this view of the Maya  
was Sir Eric Thompson,  
an acerbic Englishman  
whose intellect dominated Maya studies  
for nearly 50 years.  
No one, not even Morely  
questioned his authority.  
As Thompson began to  
formulate his ideas,  
no one had the strength  
of character to resist.  
Morely was the one who tried.  
In Morely's early works  
he offers a rather different picture.  
He is overwhelmed by Thompson's  
point of view and adopts it.  
This makes it very difficult  
for a new voice to find a path,  
and particularly when one can imagine  
that the name of Tanya  
is probably generally preceded  
by little.  
Thompson may have been able to cow  
the other members of the Carnegie Club,  
but he hadn't bargained  
on Tanya Proskouriakoff.  
My general sense of her is absolutely  
contrary in a kind of way that if you said,  
well, it looks like rain,  
she would say,  
ah, there's not a drop of  
rain in that cloud.  
She was the kind of person  
if you said,  
Oh, it's too warm in here,  
she would immediately go turn up  
the thermostat  
and make it a little warmer.  
She just had a kind of  
contrary personality.

I think that helped her also then say,  
well, if you say the Maya are peaceful,  
let's look at them  
from another point of view.  
Bit by bit, Tanya began to ask  
different questions than her colleagues.  
She also started to study  
the living Maya,  
convinced that they had something  
to teach her as well.  
When she was in highlands Chiapas,  
she took some lessons learning  
how to weave on the hand loom  
that the Maya work with.  
At the same time, the same young woman  
was helping her to learn Maya.  
This is something a lot of people  
don't know about Tanya is that  
she did study Yucatec Maya.  
Tanya's intuition that the living Maya  
could provide the valuable link  
to the past was borne out by  
a fabulous discovery in 1946.  
An American filmmaker named  
Giles Healey persuaded a Maya Indian  
to show him one of their secret place.  
The Indian lead Healy to Bonampak,  
a lost city buried in the jungle.  
Peering into a building,  
Healy was astounded to find faces  
looking back at him from the walls.  
Armies were locked in a furious battle.  
Other scenes showed prisoners of war  
and victims of human sacrifice.  
Try as Thompson might, it was  
impossible to convince anyone, I think,  
that these depicted a peaceful Maya,  
for in the Bonampak murals  
we see one of the greatest  
battle paintings  
ever created in the history  
of humankind.  
Proskouriakoff had not been allowed  
to write a single interpretive word

on the Bonampak paintings,  
but I've always wondered if it did not  
play some role  
in shaping how she looked at  
the Maya world.

Sir Eric Thompson effectively  
barred the door at Bonampak,  
preventing other Mayanists from  
pursuing the bloody implications  
of its murals.

Nevertheless, the flaws  
were beginning to show  
in his vision of the peaceful Maya.  
A few years later, another piece of  
the puzzle would slide into place.

In a bookstore in Mexico,  
Tanya found a revolutionary new book  
by a Russian named Yuri Knorozov.  
Always interested in things Russian,  
she avidly read his new theory  
of Maya writing.

Eventually, it would prove the key  
to deciphering the glyphs.

But for years Sir Eric Thompson  
would condemn the new theory  
as Communist propaganda.

In the late 1950s, Carnegie closed down  
its Mezo-America program,  
a victim of new priorities.

But Tanya was kept on as a research  
associate with an office  
at Harvard's Peabody Museum.

Her days in the field were over,  
but her greatest work had just begun.  
In her little apartment in Cambridge,  
Tanya was on to something.

When reading through Tanya's diaries,  
I can see that in the 1950s  
she made a very conscious decision  
to become more private in her life.  
She began working much more  
intensively with the hieroglyphics.

In her mind Tanya had returned  
to Peidras Negras,

the site of her first experience  
with the Maya.  
Puzzling over the monuments,  
she noticed a peculiar pattern  
with the glyphs.  
Over and over, the same glyphs  
were linked to dates  
and on each of the monuments none  
of the dates exceeded a human lifespan.  
Suddenly to Tanya the evidence

**was clear:**

the monuments were marking the stages  
of an individual's life.  
Where others had seen  
only cold calculations,  
Tanya Proskouriakoff saw the lives  
of human beings.  
It was a conclusion that cut  
to the heart of everything  
Sir Eric Thompson believed.  
Tanya marshaled her facts,  
then showed Thompson her article  
before sending it to the publisher.  
And when she talked with him  
before he had read it,  
he disagreed strongly with  
what her ideas of the Maya were.  
When he took the article home  
and he read it,  
he came back the next day and said,  
well, actually,  
I believe you're right  
which were very big words  
from someone who was considered  
a giant in the field at the time.  
And from that time on,  
when you saw a Maya monument  
you knew that it didn't deal with  
gods and priests,  
it deal with human beings,  
and that was the importance.  
In one sense, everything  
that we've done since then in hieroglyphy

and in the interpretation  
of the hieroglyphs  
has been a footnote to what Tanya did.  
She did the general breakthrough.  
When she and Yuri Knorozov in Russia  
came up with through  
hieroglyphic keys, that was it.  
We went on a roll.  
Once the code breakers went to work,  
a more human image of the Maya  
began to emerge.  
Written in the monuments  
were the stories of their lives,  
their ancestors,  
their battles and conquests.  
Across the centuries the Maya  
came alive,  
kings and queens,  
rulers of fabulous cities  
full of the voices of the people  
echoing out of the past.  
Things were changing at  
such a dramatic rate.  
We can read about, I would guess,  
that the Maya wrote.  
Given that in 1960 we could barely  
read any of it, that's extraordinary.  
David Stuart began deciphering Maya  
glyphs when he was just a boy.  
Tanya Proskouriakoff is  
one of his heroes.  
He met her shortly before she died,  
when she was continuing her careful  
scholarship at the Peabody.  
In 1998, Stewart took her ashes  
to Peidras Negras  
for burial at a sight high  
above the ancient city she had loved.  
We didn't realize how poignant  
the ceremony was going to be.  
Most of us were students  
or young people in the field,  
in our 30s at the oldest.  
And it sort of dawned

on everyone that here  
was the remains of this great lioness,  
this legendary figure.

The Guatemalans who were  
there were very emotional about this  
because this was the woman who had  
brought the Maya back to history.

At the end of his pioneering journey  
to Central America in 1840,  
the explorer, John Lloyd Stephens  
had been the first to state

**with conviction:**

One thing I believe, that its history  
is graven on its monuments.

More than 100 years later, we finally  
knew that Stephens was right.

At Palenque, Copan, Chichen Itza,  
and dozens of ruins in between,  
the ancient Maya now speak for themselves.