

THE AUSTIN

CHRONICLE

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Living Maya

Austin becomes a hotbed of past and future Maya knowledge

BY ROB D'AMICO

Linda Schele was always quite a show.

A towering figure, both physically and intellectually, she strode across the stages and workshop rooms at the annual University of Texas Maya Meetings, often peppering her language with curses and enthusiastic exclamations at moments of discovery. She liked the attention she commanded, and it fed her enjoyment in being at the forefront of research on the ancient Maya. And unlike many of her counterparts in academia, who zealously defend their findings from competing scholars, Schele encouraged lively discussion and revision of her theories, not only among the elite ranks of archaeologists, epigraphers, and art historians of Harvard, Yale, and the like, but also among those with no formal training. “She had a guru quality about her, and people would come from all over the world to Austin to hear her pronouncements,” said David Stuart, a longtime Schele friend and protégé who now heads the UT-Austin Mesoamerica Center.

Schele died in 1998, of pancreatic cancer, at the age of 55. Her continuing intellectual and cultural legacy, in terms of her contributions to the reading and interpretation of Maya hieroglyphs, remains enormous. She also put UT-Austin on the map as a leading center for Mesoamerican research. Today, UT researchers continue to be at the center of groundbreaking discoveries in the world of Maya archaeology. But they also are leading a movement to bring the

world of the ancient Maya into the lives of the living Maya and are engaging in new debates over archaeological discoveries of ecological destruction and its relevance to our planet today.

“Who Shall Read Them?”

When John Lloyd Stephens titillated readers with tales of Maya ruins in his *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* in 1841, he asked of the hieroglyphs found among the ruins, “Who shall read them?” For Stephens, it was apparent that the inscrutable adornments represented a written language. But for more than 100 years, archaeologists, historians, linguists, and epigraphers were stymied in their attempts to read the glyphs, which to many seemed to be only elaborate and artistic decorations on monuments and vases discovered throughout the jungles of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize. Unlike Egyptologists – who possessed the Rosetta stone, which laid out Greek and Egyptian in parallel with Egyptian glyphs – the Mayanists (as Maya researchers became known) had no code-breaker to rely on. In the 16th century, Spanish priests and authorities had burned thousands of ancient Maya books written on bark, since they were considered satanic. And they purged any knowledge of the glyphs in the conquered Maya population, with punishments of torture and execution for anyone found to

practice the writing. Eventually, however, researchers came to realize that the glyphs were more than just icons or symbol images – that instead they actually represented a spoken language. Scholars armed themselves with the few reading clues available. (See “Filming the Code-Breakers,” p.42.) The deciphering came slowly, as researchers often competed against each other and clashed over their theories.

Creating Maya Studies

Linda Schele wasn’t an archaeologist or an epigrapher or a historian or a linguist, at least in the beginning, although she eventually adapted aspects of all these disciplines to her research. A studio artist, she became entranced with the Maya after visiting the ruins of Palenque on a 1970 vacation to Mexico with her husband, David. There she met a fellow American artist, Merle Greene Robertson, who lived in Palenque and spent her time in a passionate pursuit of preserving and enhancing the glyphs with drawings, photographs, and rubbings of the stone. Schele returned to Palenque several times to work with Robertson, and although she eventually became an expert on many facets of Maya research, it was her participation in the now famous Mesa Redonda (round table) meetings in the early 1970s – informal gatherings of glyph buffs held in Palenque and other locations – that propelled her into the limelight. Schele began deciphering glyphs in rapid succession, partly because of her natural talent and methodical approach, but also because of her insistence on working with people from all walks of life.

“Linda was a very dynamic person and a charismatic leader,” Stuart said. “And she invited collaboration, which is what works best when tackling the glyphs.” Her groundbreaking work led her to a fellowship in pre-Columbian studies at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., and eventually to UT for graduate studies, where she was awarded a doctorate in Latin American studies in 1980.

UT-Austin became a natural destination for some Maya archaeologists due to its relative proximity to the sites and because it already housed a prestigious Latin American studies program and the world-famous Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection library. Schele began teaching in 1981, and over the next decade, she became the big draw, as aspiring archaeologists and art historians clamored to be her grad students. “It was an exciting, vibrant time,” recalled Julia Guernsey, a grad student of Schele’s, who arrived in 1993 and now works as an associate professor of art and art history at UT’s Mesoamerica Center. “Linda did so much for the program and trained so many people.”

Another Schele student, Ed Barnhart, remembers her as “a real character, a cult of personality that drew people from around

the world. She was just so enthusiastic in her work, and she had a different style than most of her peers. She cursed a lot and jumped up and down yelling ... and she cracked a lot of jokes.” Barnhart, who received his doctorate from UT in 2001 and now runs the non-profit Maya Exploration Center in Austin and Palenque, said Schele wanted to be the first professor to teach glyphs, and in doing so, she essentially “ushered in the era of Maya studies at UT.”

Everybody Welcome

For Schele, collaboration with peers and students in academia wasn’t enough. In 1977, she helped launch a series of annual glyph-reading workshops and research presentations that eventually became the Maya Meetings. The meetings weren’t intended to be draft symposiums, though, as Schele wanted to capture the spirit of the productive Mesa Redonda gatherings. She made it clear that anyone – regardless of his or her occupation or knowledge of the Maya – was welcome. Then as now, participants from around the world would come to Austin each March to learn how to read glyphs in basic, intermediate, and advanced four-day workshops and to share their findings in presentations.

Some 250 people signed up for this year’s March Maya Meetings, which focused on new research out of the Copán ruins in Honduras. “They’re not all archaeologists,” Guernsey said. “They’re dental hygienists, for example, that love archaeology. ... It’s really fun.” Indeed, a sampling of participant professions included architects, nurses, retirees, many of whom had attended the meetings for several succeeding years.

Inga Calvin, an archaeologist at the University of Colorado, has been coming to the meetings for 12 years. “The meetings bring together the best of Maya scholarship,” she said. “But most important is the format since there is so much

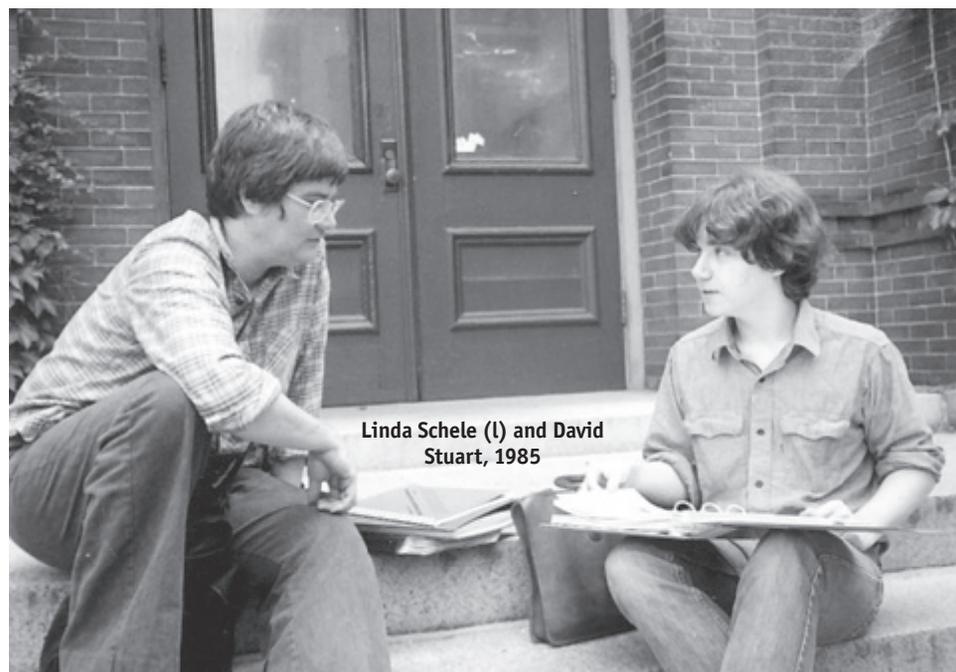
opportunity for discussion, rather than other formats where you get up and speak for 15 minutes, and that’s it.”

“I don’t think that there are that many meetings like this in the world where you have that kind of access to top professionals in the field,” Guernsey continued. “And that was something that Linda Schele was adamant about, making it accessible. She’d be up on the stage, and someone would stand up – because you could – and say something questioning her, and she’d say, ‘Oh, shit!’ ... She was willing to admit she was wrong. Not only that, but she’d recognize their point, tell them to write it up, and then she’d publish it.”

Starting Early

While Schele may have been the catalyst for UT becoming the hub of all things Maya, it was

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Linda Schele (l) and David Stuart, 1985



David Stuart

Linda Schele and David Stuart: If Linda Schele was the catalyst for UT becoming the hub of all things Maya, it was David Stuart who cemented the university's reputation on a par with Harvard and Yale.

David Stuart who cemented the university's reputation on a par with Harvard and Yale, which had been active in the Maya world for decades. Stuart, born in 1965, got his introduction to the Maya on trips to Latin America with his mother and father, George Stuart, who worked on Maya research for the National Geographic Society. As a child, he studied with and assisted Schele in Mexico and was just 12 years old when he presented his first research paper to a crowd of Mayanists in Palenque.

Like Schele and others mastering the glyphs, Stuart began drawing them and isolating them for study. He soon was, as he puts it, "obsessed" and has been deciphering them ever since. "For a lot of people, it's like a puzzle you can't get out of your head," he said. By his teens he was contributing major discoveries to the field of Maya epigraphy and, at age 18, landed a MacArthur Fellowship that let him continue to do research freely, without

the constraints of college coursework. He went on to receive his doctorate in anthropology from Vanderbilt University in 1995, published several books and many papers – including the groundbreaking "Ten Phonetic Syllables" – and taught at Harvard for 11 years before the call came from UT in 2004. Because he was following his mentor, Schele, who created the foundation of epigraphy studies at UT, a position here was a perfect fit for Stuart. He became the Linda and David Schele professor of Mesoamerican Art and Writing and director of the Mesoamerica Center (housed in the Department of Art & Art History).

Elaine Day Schele (who married Linda Schele's widowed husband, David) is now a graduate student in the UT program, after catching the Maya bug and leaving her job as a Travis County urban planner. "My previous life, I studied the future of cities, and now I study

the history of cities," she said. Day Schele said she continues to see a huge growth of interest in the UT program because of its legacy in epigraphy, as well as its multidisciplinary approach. For instance, the Mesoamerica Center faculty includes: Stuart (epigraphy), Guernsey (art history), Brian Stross (ethnobotany, food anthropology), Fred Valdez (archaeology), and Nora England (linguistics). "That's our strength, combining epigraphy, art history, and archaeology," Guernsey said.

Valdez, who surveys archaeological sites and conducts digs at the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area in Belize, said UT has had several influential Maya archaeologists who primarily have done field work. He adds that Stuart has become a "bridge between the old and the new" with a concentration of inter-departmental collaboration. "The overlap wasn't as broad at UT as it is today. It is so important for those fields to overlap now."

Digging the Dirt

It's not just academia that makes UT an exciting place for Maya studies. There's always the opportunity to camp out in the jungle and dig. Numerous grad students assist Valdez and others at field projects throughout Latin America, and graduates continue to contribute discoveries. Barnhart, for instance, was actively involved in archaeological exploration and mapping projects at Palenque and discovered a lost city, Ma'ax Na, in the jungles of Belize. Now with the Maya Exploration Center, he also leads tourists and students throughout Latin America, offering them well-informed looks at everything from Maya astronomy to the history of chocolate.

Stuart also is called out to numerous field projects, which inspires his work back in Austin. "I can't be stuck in this office too long," he said. "So every year I like to get out in the field." It's not hard for him to get an invitation, said Michael Scanlon, an administrative associate who helps run the Mesoamerica Center. "His experience is like no one else's, so he's involved in so many different projects. Everyone wants him ... [because] he embodies a lot of things that make the research work."

In April, Stuart traveled to one of the most astonishing finds in recent history, a well-preserved and colorful mural found in 2001 at San Bartolo in Guatemala's El Petén. Stuart actively assists the project's director, William Saturno, who also is one of his former students. Saturno marched hours into the jungle to San Bartolo and found a looters' pit (looters often beat archaeologists to sites), with a small hole that revealed a chamber with the painting. The mural, dating to about 100BC, made headlines around the world and provided a jolt of energy to Maya archaeologists, who are well aware that the jungle is still hiding exciting discoveries.

"Yeah, San Bartolo is impressive," Stuart said. "But there are several places like this still in the forest. San Bartolo was one of those places that didn't look like much on the surface. ... Thank God the looters didn't take it out. But really they couldn't, because you can't pry it off the wall."

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ABOUT THE MAYA

The Maya first began establishing their own artistic, linguistic, and religious identities some 2,000 years before the birth of Christ, but they're best known for their spectacular cities that dotted the present-day countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras during what is known as their Classic Period, about AD250 to 900.

During this time, the Maya built many of the spectacular temples at city-sites like Palenque, Mexico, and Tikal, Guatemala, that are now popular tourist attractions. Their populations, region-wide, numbered in the low millions, with estimates of 100,000-200,000 or more living in some of the larger autonomous city-states. They achieved astounding levels of skill in the fields of astronomy, architecture, agriculture, and mathematics. (The Maya – and probably other Mesoamerican people in the area before them – were among the first cultures to use zeros, second only to the Mesopotamians.) The Maya wrote histories and accounts of ruling life on their mon-

uments with hieroglyphs, but they also produced thousands of books written on bark paper – and burned by the Spanish in the 1500s.

It is now known that the Maya were a warlike people that – although not always as bloodthirsty as those portrayed in Mel Gibson's *Apocalypse* – are known to have included sacrifice in their war activities and religious ceremonies. Equally bloody, but not fatal, was a ceremonial practice of kings and other elites of cutting their penises with stingray spines or obsidian (and their female counterparts puncturing their tongues with roped thorns) to let blood onto paper in a bowl, which was then burned to create a rising smoke serpent, as a connection with their ancestors.

The popular destination of Chichén Itzá, in the Yucatán, became a center of political power around AD900, after many Maya mysteriously abandoned their temples and other centers of religious and ceremonial life in Chiapas and Guatemala. After a civil war of sorts between rul-

ing lords in the Yucatán, the Maya shifted their "capital" to Mayapán, south of Mérida, around AD1200. Around 1441, more warfare thrust the Maya into chaotic political divisions, which continued until the Spanish conquistadors arrived in 1519 and defeated warring leaders around 1541. The Spanish, however, were forced to put down numerous Maya rebellions throughout the centuries leading to the independence movements of Central American countries, and rebellion was in the news as recently as the 1990s, with the Zapatista movement in Chiapas.

Today, the Maya number more than 10 million and speak 30 recognized Mayan languages, which are categorized into 12 major groups. Like many indigenous peoples in Latin America, they have been marginalized, disenfranchised, and outright killed, particularly in the brutal Guatemalan Civil War that raged from 1960 to 1996, and included the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Maya.

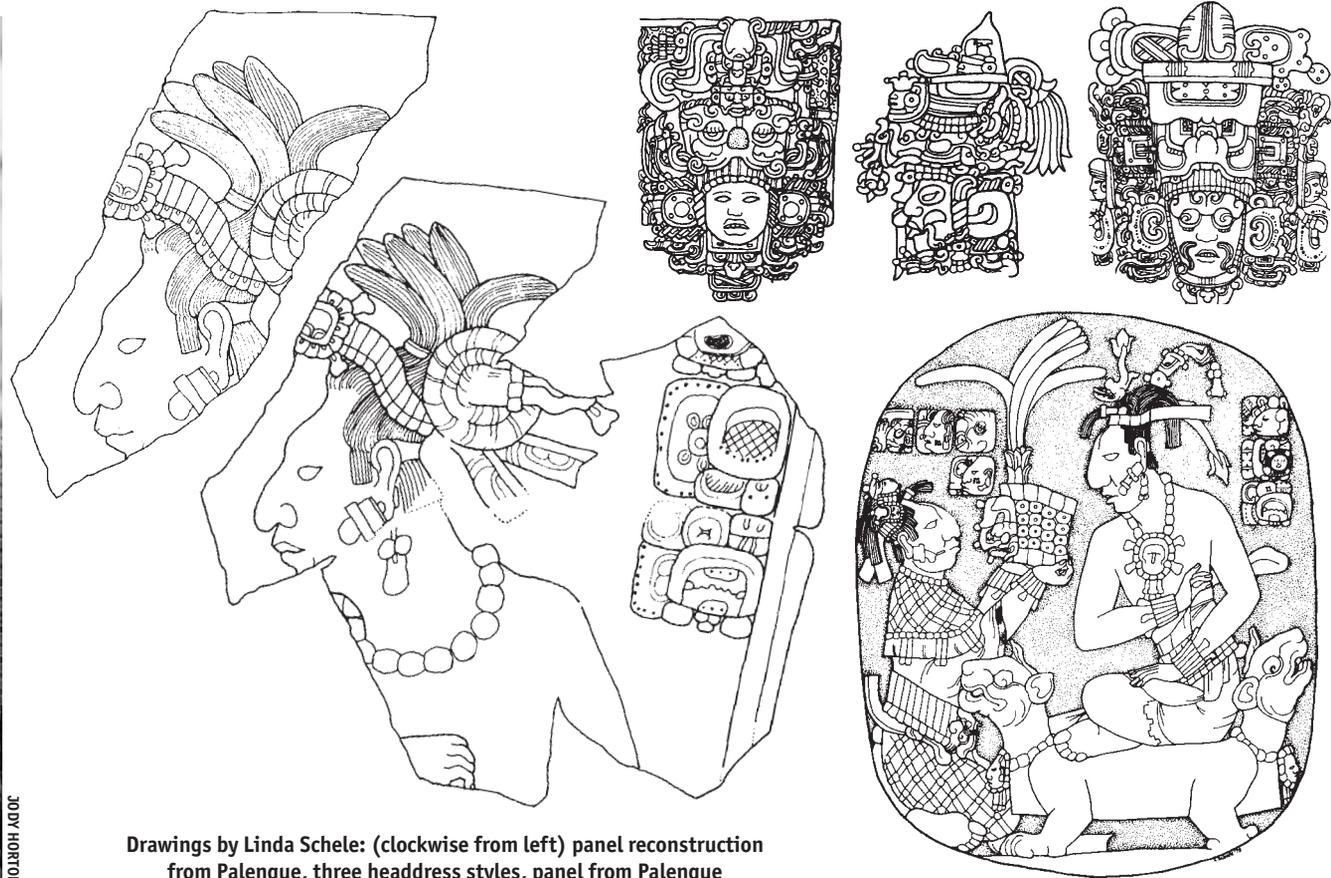
– R.D.



UT archaeologist
Fred Valdez



JODY HORTON



Drawings by Linda Schele: (clockwise from left) panel reconstruction from Palenque, three headdress styles, panel from Palenque

Lessons of History

The Maya were extraordinary in their precise accounting of dates, and one such designation was based on a Long Count calendar, which last began in 3114BC and is expected to end on Dec. 21, 2012 (give or take a day, as the exact date is in dispute). That end point has created a buzz in the media as numerous Maya enthusiasts – often from a New Age movement coined “Mayanism” – have declared that since the time period has great import in Maya creation myths, the date will signal either a shift in global consciousness that will benefit mankind or doomsday events like meteors, floods, supernova explosions, and a variety of other end-of-the-world scenarios.

What do the serious Maya scholars think? To them, it’s mostly bunk – the vast majority believe that the date is nothing more than an ending of the Long Count, which merely signifies the beginning of another Long Count. Nevertheless, it’s certain that doom and gloom prophecies will put the Maya in the headlines for the next few years. Stuart would like those headlines to read a bit differently, although with a similar slant to the doom and gloom – conversations about where our planet is heading with climate change and other environmental concerns.

“The [ancient] Maya trashed their environment, and there were dire consequences,” Stuart said. For instance, much of the forest of what was lowland Guatemala at the time was felled for firewood. Many archaeologists believe that was a major factor – along with periods of drought – in the abandonment of the cities and larger population centers in the northern area of El Petén and in Chiapas. The grandeur of the Maya’s Classic Period, with construction of towering temples and extraordinary achievements in

astronomy and art, came to a remarkably quick halt, which long baffled archaeologists wondering why monuments recording history stopped suddenly around AD900. “We definitely can say now that this environmental destruction was a huge issue for the Maya,” Stuart said. “The idea that these native populations were always good stewards of the land is false. Human beings have always had a disruptive effect on the environment, wherever they are.”

Wetter times and dispersed populations led to the return of the jungle that then buried the ruins for centuries. But today the destruction rages again. The forests of El Petén are literally

The Maya Long Count calendar last began in 3114BC and is expected to end on Dec. 21, 2012 (give or take a day).

under siege by what environmentalists call “invaders,” armies of men with gasoline cans clearing the jungle on behalf of farmers and cattle ranchers. The Guatemalan government has made some efforts to halt the invasions but with little success, even in supposedly protected conservation areas. The clearing and populating of the jungle also threatens archaeological sites, since it makes the areas more accessible to looters.

Archaeological tourism is one obvious response, since tourists bring money, which leads to opportunities to protect archaeological sites. But Stuart noted that equally important is engaging the present-day Maya in

archaeological research to connect them with the history, language, and religion of their ancestors. An engaged community is more likely to be part of any possible solution in protecting archaeological sites, and in helping interpret them. It would also make it harder for the governments of Mexico and Guatemala – which have long isolated, disenfranchised, or simply killed the Maya – to ignore the needs of those communities.

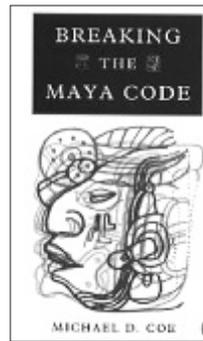
Stuart sees UT playing a significant role in this engagement, which began with direct invitations and financial support for Maya to attend the Maya Meetings each year. “These Maya are representative of a group of up-and-coming intellectuals who are very engaged in discussions on what’s going on with our research,” he said. Next year, some of these scholars will lead presentations, he added.

For Ed Barnhart, having Maya at the meetings and workshops learning to read glyphs has made the UT event unique. “This is a connection to their ancestors. ... They have an opportunity to read what they wrote instead of reading what someone else has written about them, which is real appealing.” UT is taking its outreach a step further by opening a center for Maya research in Antigua, Guatemala, where it has been offered use of a historic 17th century estate. Stuart said he hopes to have the center – which will allow both Maya and foreign scholars to meet and confer – operational by fall.

For Stuart, UT’s solid reputation in Maya research is exciting, but the most moving moment for him at this year’s Maya Meetings came at the end of a screening of *Breaking the Maya Code*. The film showed Maya children learning to read and write glyphs in Guatemala. “Maya kids learning to write Mayan. ... Yeah, this archaeology is about ancient civilizations, but it has relevance to living people.” ■

FILMING THE CODE-BREAKERS

The more-than-centurylong struggle to decipher the Maya hieroglyphs is a fascinating story of clashing egos, missteps, and brilliant discoveries – all captured in Michael Coe’s 1992 book, *Breaking the Maya Code*. Much of the book covers the roles



of Linda Schele and David Stuart and others associated with the University of Texas, along with accounts of the famous Mesa Redondas (round table discussions in Palenque, Mexico). Equally impressive is the film version of the story, adapted from the book and directed by David Lebrun. Lebrun premiered the film *Breaking the Maya Code* at this year’s Maya Meetings. “This was the toughest audience in the world, and they all loved it,” said Coe, who also raved that the film maintains the subject’s academic integrity while still entertaining people who know nothing about epigraphy.

The film has since played in a few festivals in the U.S. and Canada, but Lebrun hopes to have it return to Austin for a screening, as well. Until then, you can catch the 50-minute version of the 116-minute film as it was shown on NOVA as “Cracking the Maya Code,” by visiting www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/mayacode. The site also has interactive pages highlighting Maya culture, timelines, and a podcast on how the ancient Mayan language may have sounded, with spoken examples from Barbara MacLeod, who got her doctorate at UT. — R.D.