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## Book Review

# Reading the Maya Glyphs

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**Book Title:** Reading the Maya Glyphs

Author: Michael D.Coe, Mark Van Stone

Publisher: Bibliotheca Alexandrina

Year of Publication: 2011

ISBN: 978-977-452-155-8

No. of Pages: 176

Book Size: 16 x 24 cm



The deciphering of Maya hieroglyphic writing, either listed on the monuments, or written in the manuscripts, or painted or carved on ceramics, can be read easily with some confidence now. Such decipherment changed our knowledge about the ancient civilization, and provided the Mayan people a long history that other areas lack, especially from the New World in Columbia. Many years ago, the scientific knowledge of this type of script was confined to scientists, art historians and other specialists.

As it was not familiar to the public, it seems to be difficult as it consists of about 800 marks, and this made it a more complex and ambiguous system than it is. The author Michael D. Co. and photographer Mark Van Stone succeeded

in collecting rich scientific material about this great civilization and its rich writing and presented it to us in its available valuable book form. The Calligraphy Center had translated this book due to the lack of Arabic references about this culture and its writings.

Among the topics that are included and mentioned in this publication is the nature of this script, the Mayan calendar, and texts of the ruling families and politics, and every aspect of the natural world and the extraordinary that existed. Almost 160 years ago, the jungle-shrouded ruins of the ancient Maya civilization of Mexico and Central America were discovered.

The Maya script is a somewhat difficult one, both in its underlying structure and in the way scribes wrote variations on it. Yet, the

subject matter of most public inscriptions, as those of ancient Egypt, is relatively restricted, and there is much repetition and redundancy.

As in Egypt, among the Maya there was a strong linkage between text and picture, one providing a commentary for the other. The book has presumed no previous knowledge of the Maya or their script. The main aim is to guide the reader step-by-step into decipherment, with examples from actual texts. Hope is to help beginner and intermediate students to be able to read relatively the simple texts and to gain a deeper understanding of the remarkable civilization that produced them.

This book consists of an introduction and twelve chapters, in addition to illustration examples, and a Syllabary for the Maya Script.

Chapter one provides an overview about the Maya Civilization, and how it arose, flourished and disappeared in the tropical lowlands of Southeast Mexico and neighboring Central America. Thanks to modern decipherment, it provided us with a fairly accurate picture of Classic Maya society and politics.

Chapter two deals with the nature of the Maya script; starting from its principles, and some conventions for transcribing the Maya Glyphs, the Morphosyllabic signs, the Syllabograms; ending with some grammar rules which include the nouns, gender, pronouns, verbs and adjectives.

Chapter three continues describing this interesting script, and it is about time and the calendar. The ancient Maya had deep knowledge of naked-eye astronomy, and the movement of the visible planets and of the sun and the moon. In this chapter, one can read about the numerals and the Calendar Round of

the Mayans, including the 260-day count and the Maya month signs.

Chapter four is about the Royal rites and the Royal rituals within the Mayans; starting from their birth dates of both living rulers and supernatural ancestral deities that were noted with great care. Then it moves to the idea of the accession, as the most significant event in the life of a royal person was his accession to power. Then the writer moves to the idea of the death and burial, and the rituals performed by rulers and their families throughout their lives.

As for the places and the politics, it was discussed in chapter five, where there is valuable information about the emblem glyphs which follow personal names, or the names of Royal kings and their wives. In addition to the Toponyms which include the names of the places of the Maya city.

Chapter six reports the Dynastic names, kings titles and the supreme ruler of the city-State policy; in addition to the list of all the Rulers of every major Maya city-State. Relationships were an important subject that was presented by the author, including the parentage statements: spouse and siblings. This was discussed in chapter seven.

Chapter eight is about the warfare, where one can read the glyphs related to the general war, and the prisoners procedures.

Scribes and artists, and the ceramic texts, were described in chapters nine and ten. The author expressed this point through the users of the brush pens, the carvers; in addition to this, he mentioned other titles for artists and scribes.

The author described the Mayan society through the supernatural world. He mentioned that although there was no written religion in

the Maya; yet, they are still deeply religious people. They had major gods; some of them connected with agriculture others with daily life, and some with the elites and the royal lineage. In this part, there is a list about the major gods, and the paired gods, and the triads. There was also the death gods, and the way the spirit-companions.

The inanimate and animate worlds were an important final subject in the book; it focuses on the physical world, and the directions of the sky and the Earth in the Mayan glyphs, then it moves on to the humans and animals as an example of the living world, then to the buildings and structures and the vessels as an example of the non-living.

Most of the previous chapters include different exercises to teach the reader step-by-step how to read the Maya glyphs, in addition to the answers that are at the end of the book.

Also, there are illustration examples photographed by Mark Van Stone, which include the drawings and photographs to introduce the reader to some actual texts, carved, painted, or drawn on a wide variety of materials. In the end, there is a syllabary, and the Maya lexicon which includes the Maya glyphs.

The Calligraphy Center had translated and published this book into Arabic. It was translated by a group of professors specialized in the field of translation as Dr. Isahaq Ebeid, Dr. Mervat Fashal and Dr. Mustafa Riad, Ahmed Mansour, Azza Ezzat, Yasmin Abdou and Radwa Zaki had also participated in the translation and were able to present the idea of this book into Arabic easily, despite the specificity of the subject and specialization. Dr. Mohammed Abdul Ghani had reviewed the Arabic language for this book, and paid special attention to adjust and compare it with the English version, in a very simple way, with no misinterpretations.