

The Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions Project: Initiated in 1967 by the Stella and Charles Guttman Foundation

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I read with great interest and considerable pleasure Michael Coe's *Breaking the Maya Code* (1992). Of particular interest to me was his discussion of the initiation of the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* project in 1967. Coe wondered how was it that the Guttman Foundation "got involved in the first place" (1992:285). Dr. Coe noted that the answer was not included in Vol. 1 of the *Corpus*, published in 1975. The answer to that question, furnished below, is an interesting footnote to a project that had considerable significance both in anthropology and law, and provides insights into the occasionally creative relationship between philanthropy, professional anthropologists and amateur Mayanists.

My interest in developing a corpus of Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions can be traced back to the summer of 1950, when I studied Spanish at the University of Michoacan, Colegio de San Nicolas de Hidalgo, in Morelia, Michoacan, Mexico (founded in 1541). For the first time I was exposed to artifacts of Mexico's pre-Columbian history, which at that time were easily found and collected. Wealthy persons were then able to acquire pre-Columbian materials which were dug up without any consideration of their archaeological provenance. This was a matter of concern to me even then.

This interest was set aside as I completed my B.A. (Carleton College, Minn., 1951), law school (Yale, 1954), and began practicing law with the Department of Justice (1954), and then with the firm of Arnold, Fortas & Porter (1957). It was not until 1962 that I was able to visit such Maya sites as Chichen-Itza, Uxmal, Sayil, and Labna. With innocent enthusiasm, I decided to assemble photographs of a wide range of Maya monumental inscriptions, and to try to decipher them. I soon learned that very little original source material was available. Clearly, if a usable corpus of inscriptions was unavailable to me, perhaps others had the same problem. My recognition of this problem stimulated my interest and involvement in what was to become the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions*. My goal was to aid in the decipherment of the hieroglyphs, and to preserve the texts from looters and weathering.

As a director (now also vice-chairman) of the board of a foundation created by my uncle (the Stella and Charles Guttman Foundation, of New York City), I was reasonably confident that I could secure financing for the project if I could formulate a compelling *justification* for such an ambitious project, and if leading Maya scholars confirmed that project would satisfy a need. Preparing this Justification, based on background reading and literature reviews, took me from 1962 until 1967.

In the fall of 1967, my partner at Arnold, Fortas & Porter, William D. Rogers, was also president of the Center for Inter-American Relations in New York City. I explained the *Corpus* project to him and requested his support, which he gave enthusiastically. At Bill's suggestion, Todd Catlin, then Director of the Center's Art Gallery, worked with me to pursue the *Corpus* project. Among others, Todd contacted George Kubler at Yale with whom he had been previously associated at the Yale University Art Gallery. A subsequent call was made to Yale's Mike Coe.

With Coe's assistance, the first critical meeting of what was to become the Corpus Project Advisory Committee was scheduled under the auspices of the C.I.R. Art Gallery, where Catlin was Director. In addition to Mike Coe, Todd Catlin and myself, the attendees were Harvard's Tatiana Proskouriakoff, Yale's Floyd Lounsbury, and Gordon Ekholm, Curator of Mexican Archaeology at the American Museum of Natural History.

The meeting took place at the Center for Inter-American Relations, New York City, on October 31, 1967. At that meeting, I presented my written Justification for the project which, if they approved, would be submitted to the Guttman Board. I waited apprehensively for the group's reaction. I was not sure if such a project was, unknown to me, already underway. Fortunately, the reaction of those assembled was favorable. The *Corpus* project could now move forward with the blessing of outstanding Maya scholars. Twenty-five years later, it is possible to see that the review board correctly assessed the problem then facing Mayanists, and the *Corpus* project achieved an important objective by preserving part of the Maya historical record that might otherwise have been

lost. As Ian Graham wrote (1971:63) in the catalog for the CIR. exhibition entitled *The Art of Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*.

From several points of view the recent surge of looting from archaeological sites is extremely distressing, and one of the areas worst affected is now the Maya, with relief sculpture the prime target. Any nonprofessional disturbance of a monument from its original setting involves a loss of scientific data, but an aspect even more serious is that these heavy stone shafts almost invariably have to be reduced in weight and size for clandestine removal. At best an uncarved back is chiseled or sawn off, and the resulting thin slab skillfully cut into manageable sections which later can be neatly cemented together. But in dozens of other cases, inscriptions down the sides or across the top have been ruthlessly hacked away, or apprentice plunderers without skill or technical equipment have simply smashed sculpture to pieces, hoping to sell this pitiful rubble to cultivated lovers of 'primitive art.' The worst of it is, they are too often successful.

The written Justification, dated October 31, 1967, called for the following items to be included in the *Corpus*:

- a. A discussion of the significance of the Maya hieroglyphics
- b. A short history of the Maya civilization and the conquest
- c. The status of decipherment efforts
- d. The hypothesis that the monumental inscriptions are historical in nature
- e. The need to insure preservation of the texts (threatened by looters and weathering), by photography and line drawings
- f. Dissemination of the texts to promote decipherment
- g. The establishment of an Advisory Committee

After the approval of the project in general terms, Mike Coe contributed his personal effort by editing the Justification that I had prepared. The Justification profited from his professional hand, and I have always been appreciative of his assistance.

In addition to those attending the meeting on October 31, 1967, the following people were later added to the Advisory Committee: Dr. Ignacio Bernal, then director of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico; Dr. Luis Lujan-Munoz, director, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, de Guatemala; Dr. Gordon R. Willey, of Harvard's Peabody Museum, and Dr. Stephen Williams, Peabody director. Though

not a member of the Advisory Committee, valuable assistance was given by Dudley T. Easby, Jr. who was a principal organizer of the Metropolitan Museum exhibition *Before Cortez* (1970). The Advisory Committee met four times in 1969.

Subsequently, I presented the Justification to the Guttman Foundation board, which approved initial funding for the *Corpus* project. Ian Graham was selected to undertake the first phase of the pilot project.

The first phase of the project was to establish details of the *Corpus* format. Ian Graham was the best qualified person for this assignment by virtue of his photographic skills and his ability to make precise line drawings of hieroglyphics, and to work in remote jungle locations. He has devoted himself to the project since 1968 and has produced most of the volumes, the latest as recently as 1992. The results of Ian's work on the first phase of the project are reflected in Volume I of the *Corpus*. Important decisions included:

- a. The decision to publish the introduction in both English and Spanish.
- b. Line drawings and photographs of each monument would be included.
- c. A fixed scale of 1 = 10 would be used for the photographs (the scale for drawings vary).
- d. A form of binding would be used that would permit rearrangement of the pages.
- e. Site plans at scale of 1:2000 would be included.

It was estimated that it would take 16 person-years to complete the project, but it turns out that this was a significant underestimate.

During the two-year period in which the pilot project was being pursued, Todd Catlin and I acted as joint coordinators of the project. With the completion of the pilot project in 1970, administration of the *Corpus* project was taken over by the Peabody Museum at Harvard, and work on the first volume of the *Corpus* commenced.

As Ian Graham stated in the introduction to the *Corpus*, "the enterprise is grandly conceived." The volumes are handsome. The contents of the fourteen volumes, published starting in 1975, are as follows:

- Vol. I Introduction (Graham)
- Vol. II pt. 1 Naranjo (Graham & Von Euw)
- Vol. II pt. 2 Naranjo and Chunhuitz, Xunantunich (Graham)
- Vol. II pt. 3 Ixkun, Ucanal, Ixtutz, Naranjo (Graham)
- Vol. III pt. 1 Yaxchilan (Graham & Von Euw)
- Vol. III pt. 2 Yaxchilan (Graham)
- Vol. III pt. 3 Yaxchilan (Graham)

Vol. IV pt. 1 Itzimte, Pixoy, Tzum (Von Euw)
Vol. IV pt. 2 Uxmal (Graham)
Vol. IV pt. 3 Uxmal and Xcalumkin
(Graham & Von Euw)
Vol. V pt. 1 Xultun (Von Euw)
Vol. V pt. 2 Xultun, La Honradez, Uaxactun
(Von Euw & Graham)
Vol. V pt. 3 Uaxactun (Graham)
Vol. VI pt.1 Tonina (Mathews)

Some of the consequences of the *Corpus* project were the following:

a. The *Corpus* aided the progress of decipherment. As Ian Graham wrote in the catalog *The Art of Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (1971:23-24):

At the beginning of this introduction, reference was made to the initiation of a new project, the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions*. Want of such a publication having been acutely felt by all students in this field, the first steps to remedy it were taken by the Guttman Foundation, acting in collaboration with the Center for Inter-American Relations. The 'upended frog' date was October, 1968, when a preliminary study was commissioned that would define the problem, estimate the magnitude of the task, and suggest a design for the *Corpus*.

Dr. Floyd Lounsbury, a leading Maya scholar, has characterized the *Corpus* as "most useful" to both professionals and amateurs. It is, he stated, to be regarded as a "godsend." In other words, it served its primary purposes, preserving some of the Maya monumental texts and contributing to their decipherment.

b. The establishment of the rescue fund for Maya sites in Guatemala, under the sponsorship of the Tikal Association and Karl Meyer. As part of this project, Guatemalans of Maya heritage were paid to live at remote archaeological sites to protect the sites from looters.

c. In the fall of 1972, the Congress of the United States enacted a law to regulate the importation into the United States of pre-Columbian monumental or architectural sculptures. 19 U.S.C. § 2091-95. This law precluded importation into this country of any such sculpture in the absence of a certificate from the country of origin stating "that such exportation was not in violation of the laws of that country." Items imported into the United States in violation of the law are subject to being seized and forfeited and then returned to the country of origin. (A parsimonious Congress added the stipulation, "if that country bears all expense incurred incident to such return...") The implementing regulations went into effect in 1974. The

customs law has reduced the attractiveness of the United States as a market for stolen pre-Columbian monumental sculptures. Unfortunately, a market still exists in Asia and Europe, particularly in Switzerland, where the importation of stolen sculptures is not locally prohibited.

The customs law can be regarded as the mirror image of the *Corpus* project. While the project preserves monumental texts in photographs and line drawings, the customs law protects them in a legal sense.

d. Another major event was the 1970 *Treaty of Cooperation* between the United States and Mexico for the "Recovery and Return of Stolen Archaeological, Historical and Cultural Properties." The treaty recognizes a mutual interest in the protection of Mexican (and United States) pre-Columbian artifacts and commits both governments to the recovery and return of illegally exported objects.

e. In 1972, a landmark criminal prosecution was brought in the United States district court in Los Angeles against Clive Hollingshead, and others, on the charge of conspiring under United States laws to transport stolen goods, in this case a stela stolen from Machaquila, a site in Guatemala. Key elements of proof were photographs taken at the site in Guatemala by Ian Graham prior to the time that he started working on the *Corpus*. Graham's preliminary detective work and prodding galvanized the FBI into action. Never before had the criminal laws of the United States been applied to such conduct. The case was tried before a jury for two weeks and a verdict of guilty on all counts was returned. This case established that it is a violation of the criminal laws of the United States to engage in the transportation of looted pre-Columbian artifacts. The Machaquila Stela was exhibited in the United States prior to being returned to its rightful home in Guatemala.

News of the Hollingshead conviction had a profound effect on the art collecting community in the United States. By discouraging United States collectors from dealing in stolen material, it helped to reduce the pillaging of archeological sites.

The prosecution made it clear that the *Corpus* could be used to establish the elements of a criminal case in the event documented monumental hieroglyphics were stolen from their country of origin.

I am gratified to have participated in the events that contributed to the creation of the *Corpus* making it possible for me to answer authoritatively Mike Coe's question concerning the origin of the *Corpus*.