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## Two Letters to Tatiana Proskouriakoff from J. Eric S. Thompson (1958-1959)

CARL CALLAWAY

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The correspondence between Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1909-1985) and Sir John Eric Sidney Thompson (1898-1975) spanned over the course of many decades and reveals a continuous collaboration and a sharing of ideas between two titans of twentieth century Maya scholarship (Solomon 202:138). The generous depth and candor of their collaboration is revealed in two letters written between 1958 and 1959, during the time Proskouriakoff was formulating her “dynastic theory” on the historicity of Classic Period Maya inscriptions. Her dynastic investigations later formed the basis for her groundbreaking work, *Historical Implications of a Pattern of Dates at Piedras Negras, Guatemala* (Proskouriakoff 1960). A striking feature of Proskouriakoff’s approach was its fearlessness in trespassing on territory already staked out and defended by Thompson. His astronomical approach believed the bulk of the Classic Period inscriptions dealt “entirely with the passage of time and astronomical matters” (Thompson 1954:168). Thompson monopolized the debate and aggressively defended his claims that historical events (i.e., births and accessions of Maya kings) were not recorded on the monuments or that Maya writing could not be read phonetically (Thompson 1954:165, 1959a:349-364). In 1959, he gave his most detailed assessment in *Grandeza y decadencia de los mayas*<sup>1</sup> (Thompson 1959b:152, after Ruz Lhuillier 1973):

Ni un solo nombre de lugar o de persona ha sido definitivamente reconocido y traducido... no conocemos (entre los cente-



**Figure 1.** Tatiana Proskouriakoff at Piedras Negras, c. 1936-38. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum.

nares de glifos de Copan y Palenque) los nombres reales de estas ciudades o siquiera sus símbolos. No encierran en manera alguna la glorificación de una persona..., no refieren historias de conquistas reales, ni registran los progresos de un imperio; ni elogian, ni exaltan, glorifican o engranden a nadie: son tan completamente impersonales y no-individualistas que hasta

<sup>1</sup> *Grandeza y decadencia de los mayas* (1959b) is the Spanish translation of Thompson’s *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization* (1954). Yet, the Spanish version professes an even stronger Thompsonian viewpoint on the “impersonal and non-individualistic” nature of Maya inscriptions and is therefore quoted here rather than the original English text.

es posible que jamás se hayan grabado en ellas el nombre de algún hombre o de alguna mujer. Hasta donde llega nuestro conocimiento, los monumentos mayas con inscripciones —hasta hoy día se han encontrado algo mas de 1,000 de ellos con textos glíficos— tratan exclusivamente del paso del tiempo, de datos sobre la Luna y el Planeta Venus, de cálculos calendáricos y de asuntos sobre los dioses y los rituales implícitos en estos temas.

[Not a single name of a place or person has been definitely recognized and translated... we do not know (among the hundreds of glyphs from Copan and Palenque) the actual names of these cities or even their symbols. They do not contain in any manner the glorification of a person... they do not refer to real historical conquests, nor do they register the progress of an empire; nor praise, glorify or aggrandize anyone: they are so completely impersonal and non-individualistic that it is possible that they may never have engraved on them the name of any man or any woman. As far as we know, the monuments with inscriptions—currently comprising over 1,000 glyphic texts—deal exclusively with the passage of time, information on the moon and the planet Venus, calendar calculations and issues about gods and rituals implicit in these topics. (author's translation)]

In his final analysis, Thompson maintained his chronocentric view that the bulk of Maya inscriptions dealt mainly with the “secrets of time and the movements of the celestial bodies” (Thompson 1954:9; 1971:64). He believed that they in no way stooped to the ordinary level of historical records of individuals.

Two letters housed in The University of Philadelphia's Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology archives (Proskouriakoff 2010) reveal the extent to which Proskouriakoff kept Thompson informed of her progress in deciphering the recorded dates of Piedras Negras. About these inscriptions, she would later note in her breakthrough work, “the distance between the initial date of a series and inaugural dates of the next does not exceed the limits of a normal lifetime ... and that each series can be construed as recording a sequence of events in the life of a single individual” (Proskouriakoff 1960:460). As the patterns of dates unfolded, she strongly suspected they spoke of individual rulers rather than astral bodies and calendar calculations.

In a letter from July 28, 1958, Thompson congratulates Proskouriakoff on her new insights with the Piedras Negras inscriptions and accepts her revisions of several dates (Figures 2 and 3). Yet, he comments that her “dynastic speculations” are possibly at fault. He compares her calculated reigns to those of Aztec rulers, and then to English monarchs. By doing so, he hopes to persuade Proskouriakoff that the ancient Maya could not have enjoyed such lengthy reigns and that her “accession theory” was in obvious error:

Harvard, Ashdon, Saffron Walden, Essex  
July 28 1958

Dear Tania:

I have your letter with the interesting account of your discovery that the niche motif introduces a new group of monuments dealing with a single series of dates. That opens up all sorts of possibilities. My congratulations. I am sure that no one has published the new readings of Stela 6 which you propose; I usually write them in Vay's book if there are changes proposed.<sup>2</sup> All I have is a query mark against the 10 Imix 4 Zip reading, indicating that I was dissatisfied with it, but hadn't anything better to offer.

Your reconstruction seems reasonable enough to me: the day coefficients are clearly 2 and 7, and the short distance number can be reasonably read as 4.19.

The month signs don't look much like Pax, but they don't look like anything for that matter. Anyhow, I am copying your new readings into my copy of Vay's opus ...

Your accession theory is an interesting one, but it makes very long reigns. I calculate that the last 8 Aztec rulers from Acampichtli [sic] in 1375 to the death of Ahuitzotl in 1503 average out at 16 years rulership per head. The Maya may not have had the same system, but I bet they had no infant rulers.<sup>3</sup> This, of course, in no way affects your general interpretation, but merely to cast doubt on your dynastic speculation. A rough calculation shows in England from the accession of Queen Anne in 1702 (if my memory isn't fooling me) to 1952 (about year present queen came to the throne) we have had 11 sovereigns in England which works out at about 22.5 years per reign. Edward VIII was the only one who didn't die a natural death, a stability seldom reached in the monarchical institution. When one considers the tropical climate of the Maya area and the complete lack of medical knowledge, I feel the figure that the Aztec figure ought to be a good guide. I deliberately started after the troubled times of the Stuarts, but counting the Commonwealth as a reign for the Stuarts from 1603 (James 1) to death of Queen Anne (17<sup>th</sup>) we have 7 reigns of 16 years each, same as the Aztec. The Tudors did better because Elizabeth I was 45 years on the throne: 118 years for 5 monarchs from Henry VII to death of Elizabeth, average 23 years, and all died in their beds. If you include the approximately 2 weeks reign of Lady Jane Grey, you bring down the average considerably, but she is never given the title of queen, although she was proclaimed queen and reigned for those few days till “Bloody” Mary overthrew her and chopped off her head. My impression is that Inca reigns averaged quite short...

<sup>2</sup> Vay is the nickname of Sylvanus Griswold Morley.

<sup>3</sup> The assumption that the Maya had no infant rulers would prove utterly false by later scholarship. At Naranjo Aj Wosal assumed the throne at about age 12 as did K'inich Janaab Pakal of Palenque (see Martin and Grube 2000:71, 162).



Harvard, Ashdon, Saffron Walden, Essex  
July 28 1958

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Your reconstruction seems reasonable enough to me; the day coefficients are clearly 2 and 7, and the short distance number can be reasonably read as 4.19. The month signs don't look much like Pax, but they don't look like anything for that matter. Anyhow, I am copying your new readings into my copy of Vay's opus.

I am inclined to believe that both these dates are determinants for 9.12.0.0.0, an earlier poor one and a later very good one:

Correction by Gregorian for 9.12.0.0.0 is 187.5 days, 3784 years having elapsed  
Therefore 8 Yaxkin + 188 = 16 Pax or 5 Pax + 188 = 8 Yaxkin.

9.11.12.7.2 is 8 years earlier, so correction should be 185.5  
9.12.14.13.1 is 14 years later, so correction should be 191 days

10 Pax + 183 = 8 Yaxkin	(2.5 days under Gregorian)
8 Yaxkin + 191 = 19 Pax	(checks with Gregorian)

Your accession theory is an interesting one, but it makes very long reigns. I calculate that the last 8 Aztec rulers from Acampichtli in 1375 to the death of Ahuizotl in 1503 average out at 16 years rulership per head. The Maya may not have had the same system, but I bet they had no infant rulers. This, of course, in no way affects your general ~~xxx~~ interpretation, but is merely to cast doubt on your dynastic speculation. A rough calculation shows in England from the accession of Queen Anne in 1702 (if my memory isn't fooling me) to 1952 (about year present queen came to the throne) we have had 11 sovereigns in England which works out at about 22.5 years per reign. Edward VIII was the only one who didn't die a natural death, a stability seldom reached in the monarchical institution. When one considers the tropical climate of the Maya area and the complete lack of medical knowledge, I feel that the Aztec figure ought to be a good guide. I deliberately started after the troubled times of the Stuarts, <sup>but</sup> counting the Commonwealth as a reign, ~~for the Stuart~~ from 1603 (James I) to death of Queen Anne (1714) we have 7 reigns of 16 years each, same as the Aztec. The Tudors did better because Elizabeth I was 45 years on the throne: 118 years for 5 monarchs from Henry VII to death of Elizabeth, average 23 years, and all died in their beds. If you include the approximately 2 weeks reign of Lady Jane Grey, you bring down the average considerably, but she is never given the title of queen, although she was proclaimed queen and reigned for those few days till "Bloody" Mary overthrew her and chopped off her head. My impression is that Inca reigns averaged quite short.

I gather there is intense competition between Ed Shook and Bill Andrews as to which is digging the largest/most important/greatest/most thrilling/emotionally most intoxicating/longest inhabited/Maya site. Linton wrote me that one of the great discoveries this past season was Izta. I wrote back to ask what the heck was Izta, and his latest reply, received this morning, is that he really had no business to mention it, and that I would have to write Ed if I wanted to know what it meant!

Figure 2. Letter by J.E.S. Thompson July 28, 1958, page 1 (photo by Carl Callaway courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives).



I must say it sounds very silly to me as though the Tikal project were going to get tied up with the Hearst press to counteract the Tulane-Nat. Geog. Andrews axis. Linton is also advancing the theory that Tikal was the intellectual leader of the Maya area, and there he has obviously got one on Bill Andrews for the old stelae of Dzibilchaltun are so smashed and eroded that they might have once carried the collected works of the Bard of Avon in Maya glyphs on them and no one would now be any the wiser. Linton's theory is that Tikaleños were the intellectual leaders because (as he believes) they were the first to group moons in sixes, but as that has about as much intellectual stimulus behind it as led to the grouping of pounds of potatoes in fourteens (pecks) or base ball innings in nines (if that is the way they are grouped), I am somewhat reluctant to elbow my way into the serried ranks of Tuscany who could scarce forbear to cheer.

Meanwhile, I plod along with the compilation of the glyph catalogue, an intensely boring business, and in my spare time I grow carnations, mow the lawn (nearly 3 hours work with the good sized gas mower I have), and listen to the village gossip and speculate why Joy Davies turned down Bob Bartram, and why he started walking out with Monica Moore, daughter of the landlord of The Rose & Crown, and wonder why the villagers who for generations have called their sons and daughters by such good English names as John Mary, Henry and Susan, now name their daughters Marylene, Vanessa, Marlene, Heather etc. and their sons Gary, Wilbur and other names more at home in Hollywood than in our quiet village.

I trust all goes well in Cambridge. We are expecting friends from Harvard, Mass. to stay with us next week-end, and I am awaiting receipt of a copy of my Thomas Gage book, out in U.S.A., but no copy has yet reached me.

If you learn the secret of Itza (cousins of the Itza once removed? Iztapa influence? new species of toucan?) the possibilities are infinite, let me know.

Best to Harry.

Yours  
Yours

*Enc*

First fold here →

→ To open cut here

AN AIR LETTER SHOULD NOT CONTAIN ANY  
ENCLOSURE; IF IT DOES IT WILL BE SURCHARGED  
OR SENT BY ORDINARY MAIL.

Sender's name and address:

← Second fold here →

Miss Talia Traskunkoff,  
c/o Peabody Museum of Archaeology  
& Ethnology  
Harvard University  
Cambridge 38, Mass  
U.S.A.



Figure 3. Letter by J.E.S. Thompson July 28, 1958, page 2 (photo by Carl Callaway courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives).

Fortunately for Maya Studies Proskouriakoff held steadfast to her calculations. She dug even deeper into the data and produced a final argument so eloquent and detailed that it would completely overturn her predecessor's entrenched arguments and reveal the historical content of Maya inscriptions. Correspondence from May of 1959 relates Thompson's acquiescence of his "cherished theory" in favor of Proskouriakoff's historical approach:

Howard, Ashdon, Saffron Walden, Essex  
May 7, 1959

Dear Tania:

Many thanks for your letter of May 1, and I was very glad to hear of your progress in the "dynasty" research. It will upset a cherished theory of mine that the Maya were so superior to the rest of mankind that they kept themselves out of the stelae, and forbore to record their wars, triumphs & extinctions! However theories are made to be upset, & if you can or, I should say, have cracked the problem, it will be a huge stride forward.

I enclose the material for the toothache & upended frog glyphs, Unfortunately, I can't get you information on the [T188] sign...

In these few lines, the preeminent authority of the times on Maya hieroglyphic writing recognizes Proskouriakoff's irrefutable breakthrough (Solomon 2002:138). The master scholar has now become the student. He fully admits that her dynastic research will no doubt upset his long-held view that Maya monuments were devoid of personal history of their creators. Thompson fulfills Proskouriakoff's request for source data, information that he knows by now will aid to completely upturn his former position that impeded progress into Maya dynastic research for decades. Graciously at the letter's end, Thompson gives Proskouriakoff the source data she needs to drive the last nail into the coffin and bury forever his "cherished theory" (Figures 4-7). To his credit, he supportively offers her the various locations of the glyphs informally dubbed the *toothache*, *upended frog* from his then unpublished Catalogue of Maya Hieroglyphs, a compendium and cross-index of over 860 signs (Thompson 1962). As a preeminent authority on Maya writing, Thompson maintained a complete index of all known inscriptions. It was vital that Proskouriakoff understood the distribution of these two glyphs and their comparable patterns from other sites. Ultimately, she deduced that the *toothache* glyph recorded royal accession while the *upended frog* glyph denoted birth. Both these deductions would prove absolutely correct in later years with the phonetic decipherment of the script. With Thompson's data in hand, Proskouriakoff charted patterns that, like an internal Rosetta Stone, cracked the code behind which the dynastic record lay hidden for centuries.

Proskouriakoff's willingness to question the

orthodoxies of her professional field and to challenge the intellectual monopoly of a tenured academic took courage and fortitude. As a leading authority on Maya writing and a dear friend, Thompson served as both an intellectual foil and collaborator during her breakthrough moment. Their letters reveal an openness to share and explore new ideas and approaches on decipherment despite clashing viewpoints. Moreover, the letters speak of an enduring friendship that assisted readily, advised openly and adventured boldly into the world of the ancient Maya writing.

## Acknowledgements

Many colleagues and friends contributed to the present study. I thank Alessandro Pezzati of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology who shared with me the Proskouriakoff files and the importance of the Thompson letters. Also, a special thanks goes to Paul Johnson for his aid in enhancing the photos of the letters and for preparing the final illustrations. I am grateful to those who read and commented on the earlier versions of this paper including Peter Mathews, Elaine Day Schele, Erik Boot, Jeff Buechler, Sven Gronemeyer, Mark Van Stone, Tyson White and Hutch Kinsman. Also, I thank Sandra A. Jobling and Cheryl Lambert of Geelong Writers for their critiques. Finally, I give thanks to La Trobe University Department of Archaeology for their continuing support of my research.

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Haward, Ashdon, Saffron Walden, Essex  
May 7 1959.

Dear Tania: Many thanks for your letter of May 1, and I was very glad to hear of your progress in the "dynasty" research. It will upset a cherished theory of mine that the Maya were so superior to the rest of mankind that they kept themselves out of the stelae, and failed to record their wars, triumphs & extinctions! However, theories are made to be upset, & if you can or, I should say, have cracked the problem, it will be a huge stride forward.

I enclose the material for the toothache & upended frog glyphs. Unfortunately I can't get you the material on the (S) (D) (D) (D) signs. I have no clue to its record until I get the photostats of my drawings back from Avis - I have written her but as I've had no reply, I fear she may be sick again.

In any case, I'm afraid I will not be able to give you all the occurrences, for if the sign is allowed to stand, as for instance the (S) (D) (D) (D) glyph, I would not be able, at present, to list it, as my cross-index of attested main signs has not yet been made. However, I'll do what I can when I receive the photostats of my drawings.

I would certainly favor using "toothache glyph" in print, for it is a fine descriptive term & enables anyone to identify & remember the glyph.

Univ. of Oklahoma Press is going to bring out a second edition of Maya hieroglyphic writing: introductions at the end of this year. I've told them I think they will lose their collective shirt on the venture, but they've decided to go ahead, so now culpa mea if the shirt is lost. I am going to write a new page preface to the new edition, & in that I want to summarize what has been done in Maya glyphic work since 1950. In that

Figure 4. Letter by J.E.S. Thompson May 7, 1959, page 1 (photo by Carl Callaway courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives).



connections would you decide on a title for the paper you plan to give at the Christmas meetings in Mexico City, & let me know what it is so that I can mention that line of research in my preface. If you don't want to tie yourself to a definite title at this time, perhaps you can give me a tentative one. I shall be writing in the future letter so far as your paper is concerned, so a tentative label for the title would be quite in order.

The weather here is delightful, & the garden is ablaze with tulips, narcissi, wallflowers, apple etc. in full bloom. I used to cherish a fragile spring forget-me-not in Harvard, Mass, but here it grows everywhere as a weed & I have to root up masses of it. On the other hand, I proudly display a sumac, which in New England is a pest. The moral of this I leave to you to disentangle.

I haven't heard from Linton for a long time. I heard some fossils had been found at Tikal, but no details.

I hope that this letter will cross one bringing me the photostats of my glyphs. I wrote Harry about a week ago about them when I failed to get any reply from him.

Good luck to your dynasty investigations

Enc

The key to the distribution sheets enclosed is in  
Maya Hieroglyphs.

P.N. 7 means Stela 7; L. Alt. are used to designate Lintel or Altar Plinths.

P.S. Would you mind asking whether there is any 2nd class rail for me anywhere around Peabody or 10 Presb. One or two publications I've expected never arrived, & I wondered whether they could have been sent to 10 Presb. & never

forwarded. This is just a guess; quite probably there is nothing.

Figure 5. Letter by J.E.S. Thompson May 7, 1959, page 2 (photo by Carl Callaway courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives).



Upended Frog. Plain      15 Examples

Pal. Cross E17, R15, U2, T16, T13  
 Insu. Wosl K12 ; T.18 Tablet, B13  
 Rug Tab. 2. A4, H5  
 Yaxchilan (L.35 V6) ; ~~2~~ (L.42, E3)  
 P.N. Ithmo (K'4) *no date?*  
 (P.N. 12, B21-Ann.)  
 Skull in Tuxtepec Mus. B7.  
 Tikal St. (23, B4) ~~Plattin, 1, D1.~~

---

Upended Frog. Compound      5 examples

Pal. Insu. Mid, F4, J4, J6, K5.  
 Mar. 32, 24 ??

### Toothache Glyph

✓ El Cayo (L1, E4) *also K next to last glyph. E2?*  
 ✓ P.N. Ith. 1 G'3 ; 15, B1, 16, C5 ; D1. 2, D3 ; L.3, A'1 (Variant)  
 Animal: L.2, K'1, 25, I8, I12 ; 36, B6 ; L.2, X9  
 Yaxchilan (L.30, H5) ; (20, D1) ; (11, C4) Animal (L.26, K'1)  
 Cop. T. 11, Slep, 12 ; 9, C9. Animal: 9, F3 ; F'1, C3  
 Pusill. E C3, D6 — *not not, no "lipper", different part 4.*  
 ✓ Marajo 20, A4 ; 6, A3  
 ✓ Seibal 7, A2  
 Pal. Animal: Sarcopl. Glycyl's ; Cross S15 ; Sun, P4 ; Rug, 1, P9 ;  
 Rug 2, A3, Carved I.S. pit, G1  
 ✓ Bonampak, 2, C1 —


Codex Madrid 90a, 91a, 92a, 93a  
 Dresde 67a Animal D23b

Figure 6. Letter by J.E.S. Thompson May 7, 1959, page 3 (photo by Carl Callaway courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives).



*model.*  
 Upended frag with lunar postfix 54 examples.  
 Copan 6, D8; 4, A2; 7, B12; H.S. Frag. Garden XII I; Cop. T. east; 12 Post, B13,  
*model.*  
 12 Post, B10; 3, A7; 7, F8 *model.*  
 Pal. Cross A17, D2, E7, P5, P7, P11, P13, S4, S9, U7  
 Pal. 4th. Cross. B16, N2  
 Pal. Sun, P13, C1  
 Pal. Inscr. West E2  
 Pal. Ruiz Tablet 1, C4, S3  
 // Pal. H.S. A5  
 // Pal. H.S. D, Pien G; T. 18, Tablet C6; Sarcophagus.  
 Yax. L. 30 H1  
 P.N. H. 1, Q1; R4. 3, A8; 3, D6; Alt. 3 A2, 365 CS;  
 P.N. 1, B3; 8, A9  
 Pusilla H D14  
 Navajo 24, B13; 22 F6; 22, G3; 10, A2; 12, B2;  
 Tonina 20 D4; 30 A4.  
 Postlac 1 D4  
 Morales 2, B9  
 Maxacta 7, C2 *date illegible.*  
 Chichen 3 tablets, 3, A1; 4 tablets, 3, front, A1; 4 tablets 2, C8  
 Nebaj 7 tablets var CS.  
 Tichat st 23  
 Kuma, L1, M2.  


---

 Witt Forward Prefix  7 examples.  
 Palenque Cross C17; E13, U9  
 Sun, C10  
 Inscript. West K9; N3, O6  


$$\frac{54}{81}$$

Figure 7. Letter by J.E.S. Thompson May 7, 1959, page 4 (photo by Carl Callaway courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives).