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Ian Graham and the Maya

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Figure 1. Ian Graham, ca. 1975 (photo: Hillel Burger).

Ian Graham passed away at age 93 on August 1, 2017, at the close of an extraordinary and varied life. All future histories of Mesoamerican studies will highlight his unique contributions as an explorer, preservationist, and documentarian of Maya ruins and art. It is no exaggeration to say

that Ian's legacy will forever stand at least equal to those of Alfred Maudslay (his fellow Englishman and personal hero), Teobert Maler, Sylvanus Morley, and other famous explorers from the early years of Maya studies.

Ian James Graham was born on

November 12, 1923, at Chantry Farm, Campsey Ash, Suffolk, to two aristocratic parents. His father, Lord Alistair Mungo Graham, was the youngest son of the Duke of Montrose, and his mother, Lady Meriel Olivia Bathurst, was the daughter of the seventh Earl Bathurst. She passed away suddenly at age 41, when Ian was only eleven years old, and was, in Ian's own words, a woman of "notable beauty, intelligence and sensibility" with a keen sense of humor (Graham 2010:4). Ian inherited much from her.

His youngest years were spent at Chantry Farm, before he was sent to boarding school at the age of eight, where he "failed to be stimulated by most of the teaching." Throughout childhood he had a persistent fascination with all things mechanical and electrical—an interest that would last his whole life, and which came in handy innumerable times in his years in Maya archaeology, with its seemingly constant need to repair camera equipment or Land Rovers in the field, or to tinker with the Rolls Royce he kept for years in his garage in England.

Ian later attended Winchester College and was educated at Cambridge University and Trinity College, Dublin, majoring in physics. The war years intervened in his university work, and between 1942 and 1947 he served in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, helping to develop and test new types of radar equipment. Ian was very proud of this research and of the experiments in which he participated, and in his later years he would often excitedly describe the inner workings of these instruments. Throughout his education Ian never had any formal training in archaeology. His brief idea to pursue a degree in art history after the war nevertheless hints at an early and ever-present fascination with visual images and antiques, interests that would steer him later in life to the world of the ancient Maya.

A fellowship at the National Gallery brought Ian to London in the early 1950s, where he worked as a technician in the art conservation lab. Soon he was earning commissions for his great skills at photography, especially of architecture, and he contributed to a number of coffee-table books into the mid-1960s, including Sir Mortimer Wheeler's *Splendors of the East: Temples, Tombs, Palaces and Fortresses of Asia* (Wheeler 1965). After traveling to New York in 1957, Ian landed a brief job as assistant to the photographer Irving Penn, and in that capacity worked closely with Robert Freson, another noted photojournalist of the twentieth century.

His first encounter with the world of the ancient Maya came in 1958, as a result of having driven his 1927 Rolls Royce Torpedo all the way from New York to Mexico—a slight detour from his westward goal of California! Through fortuitous connections in Mexico City he began to hear for the first time about the existence of the Maya, and of wonderful ruins named Yaxchilan, located in what was then one of the most

remote parts of Chiapas. "How could it be that I had never even heard of Maya civilization?" he wondered in retrospect (Graham 2010:118). Ian thought the Maya would be a ripe topic for a new photography book, and while researching the subject, both in Mexico and when back in London, he learned of Alfred Maudslay and his great work as a photographer and recorder of Maya ruins. He was hooked. Almost immediately Ian was back in Mexico, intent on exploring Maya ruins throughout Mexico, Guatemala, and beyond. In San Cristóbal de las Casas he met the noted Mayanist Frans Blom, who inspired Ian to further pursue his adventures. Over the following months he traversed the entire Maya region, through Chiapas, Yucatan, Belize, Honduras, and then into northern Guatemala. He was eventually led to a site named Aguateca, which he was sure (correctly) no archaeologist had seen before. For Ian, by this time already 35 years old, this was a "Eureka moment," for his life's purpose suddenly seemed clear.

Ian's early efforts to document ruins were sponsored in part by the Middle American Research Institute at Tulane University, which in 1967 published his *Archaeological Explorations in El Peten, Guatemala*, an instant classic that recorded a stupefying array of new finds at sites that few Maya archaeologists even knew existed at that time. These included Aguateca, Dos Pilas (Figure 2), Machaquila, Kinal, Nakbe, and El Mirador (Graham 1967). This last site is today one of the most important in ancient Mesoamerica, a vast Preclassic city that still keeps many secrets about the origins of Maya civilization in the lowlands. In early 1962 Ian was the first (even amateur) archaeologist to survey El Mirador and realize its true extent. With no formal training he accurately mapped and documented the immense ruins over the course of ten days and published a brief newspaper account of his finds that same year (Graham 1962).

The Tulane volume was a great success (a second one was planned on Dos Pilas and other sites but never completed) and by the mid-1960s Ian was regularly corresponding with a number of important figures in Maya research, including J. Eric S. Thompson and Tatiana Proskouriakoff. While in the field, in the Petexbatun region, he came into close contact with those working on Harvard's archaeological project at nearby Ceibal (Seibal), including Gordon Willey and A. Ledyard Smith. His great energy and skill at mapping caught their eye, and he was brought on the dig and given the task to survey Ceibal's extensive ruins, much of them hidden in dense forest and in difficult terrain. These early associations with Harvard, the Peabody Museum, and Willey set the stage for the eventual development of the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions (CMHI) program and its ambitious plan to compile and publish all Maya inscriptions.

The vision of the Corpus project began as early as 1966, in discussions between William Coe



Figure 2. Ian cleaning a newly turned stela at Dos Pilas, Guatemala, 1976 (photo: Otis Imboden).

of Pennsylvania's Tikal project, Robert Wauchope of Tulane University, and Willey. Together they explored ways to fund a joint venture that would take inventory of all of the archaeological sites in Peten, using the records of previous archaeologists as well as oil companies (by the 1960s, Shell Oil and others were exploring and prospecting throughout northern Guatemala). This particular plan fell through due to a lack of money, but it was soon revived and expanded through the support of the Charles Guttman Foundation. By now it was clear to all that Ian was the person to spearhead the ambitious effort, and in 1968 he settled at Harvard as a Research Fellow at the Peabody Museum, poring through the photographic archives of the Carnegie Institution of Washington and those of Teobert Maler. These provided the basic raw materials that Ian sought to expand, and thus the CMHI program was born.

The Corpus project was a game changer, and the results were immediate. He spent many months in the field in both Mexico and Guatemala, and in 1975 produced the very first fascicle on the monuments of Naranjo (Graham and von Euw 1975). Volumes on Yaxchilan soon followed (Graham and Von Euw 1977). In the early 1970s the Corpus hired an assistant, Eric von Euw, who would concentrate most of his efforts in Yucatan and Campeche, while Ian focused on the Peten and Usumacinta regions. Ian opted to focus on poorly known sites or remote ruins that were under threat of looters, which by this time were running rampant, especially in northern Guatemala. Well-published sites such as Palenque, Copan, and Tikal were low priorities. Together these early Corpus efforts produced a trove of field drawings and photographs. Later collaborators who worked under Ian at the CMHI included Peter

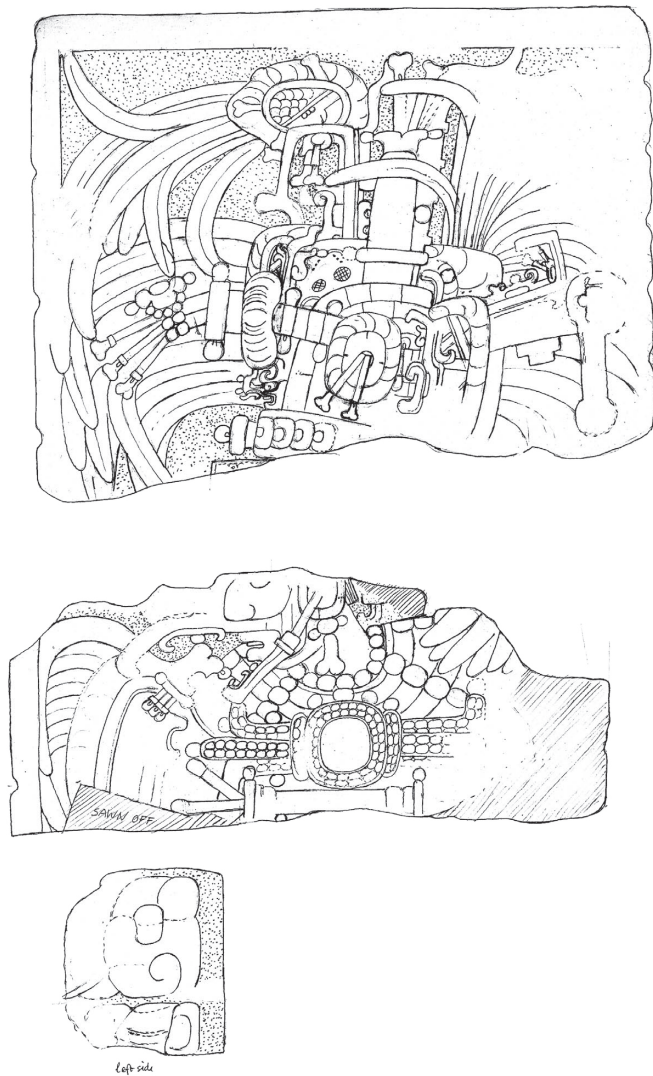


Figure 3. Field sketch of Piedras Negras Stela 4. Drawing by Ian Graham © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 2004.15.17.3.1.

Mathews, myself, and Lucia Henderson.

Ian's fieldwork usually revolved around three tasks—photography, field sketching (Figure 3), and mapping, at all of which he excelled. And despite having drawn hundreds of inscriptions Ian never saw himself as an epigrapher, nor as having any special insight into the intricacies of Maya hieroglyphic writing. He ascribed this to “an inadequate iconic memory,” stating that he “never pretended to be anything but a bushwhacker outfitted with a camera, compass, pencil, some grains of common sense, and an instinct for self-preservation” (Graham 2010:292). But of course Ian knew a great deal about glyphs, as revealed in many office conversations I had with him when we checked and teased out details of our drawings. He had a strong sense that his own role was not that of a decipherer, but as one uniquely suited

to record, preserve, and disseminate the raw information for scholarship.

Ian's drawings of Maya sculptures stand on their own merits as stunning artworks (Figures 4–6). Their intricate line-work and careful stippling set a new standard for accuracy and objectivity, built on that first developed by William Coe of the Tikal project. In those days and until very recently the drawings were produced using ink on mylar, tracing over a preliminary acetate version that was, in turn, traced from a photograph (see Graham 1975:12-13). A pencil field drawing, ideally made in the presence of the original sculpture, provided a check for all the relevant details of sculpture. In this way Ian created the ideal standard for the recording of Maya monuments. The same can also be said of the site maps he drew and published as part of the CMHI publications, many made from his own surveys undertaken under extremely difficult circumstances. Today those who make archaeological maps or draw sculpture strive to follow Ian's methods and aesthetic sensibility, even when producing drawings and maps digitally on a tablet or on-screen.

The photocopies of field drawings and other output from the CMHI provided the single most important catalyst to the rapid decipherment of Maya hieroglyphs, a wave that crested during the 1980s. Hundreds of new texts were now available to the small community of epigraphers of that time, and no longer were source materials largely restricted to a handful of well-known sites. By generously sharing his visual archive, Ian provided epigraphers with much-needed raw materials to compare texts, analyze alternative spellings, and track dynastic histories. Without these basic raw materials to work from, little real progress would have been possible in deciphering the Maya script and analyzing the Classic Mayan language that underlies it.

In addition to his unending tasks for the Corpus, Ian had a deep interest in researching the lives of key personalities in very early Maya studies, writing important biographies of his famous predecessors in exploration, Alfred Maudslay (Graham 2002) and Teobert Maler (Graham 1997). I suspect that these historical exercises, researched while at Harvard or in Europe in between his field seasons, allowed Ian to understand and reflect on his own role and importance in the exploration and photography of Maya ruins. Through their stories he surely came to realize his own role as their successor, the last of a grand tradition of Maya exploration.

He was sometimes skeptical of new technology, always more comfortable with his tried and true methods and equipment—a Hasselblad 500C large format camera, a clipboard, and a compass. For mapping he would often measure distances between mounds simply by pacing in a straight line, always with astounding accuracy. He never once used a digital camera, to my knowledge, but late in life he foresaw how important



Figure 4. Yaxchilan Lintel 24. Drawing by Ian Graham © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 2004.15.6.5.21.

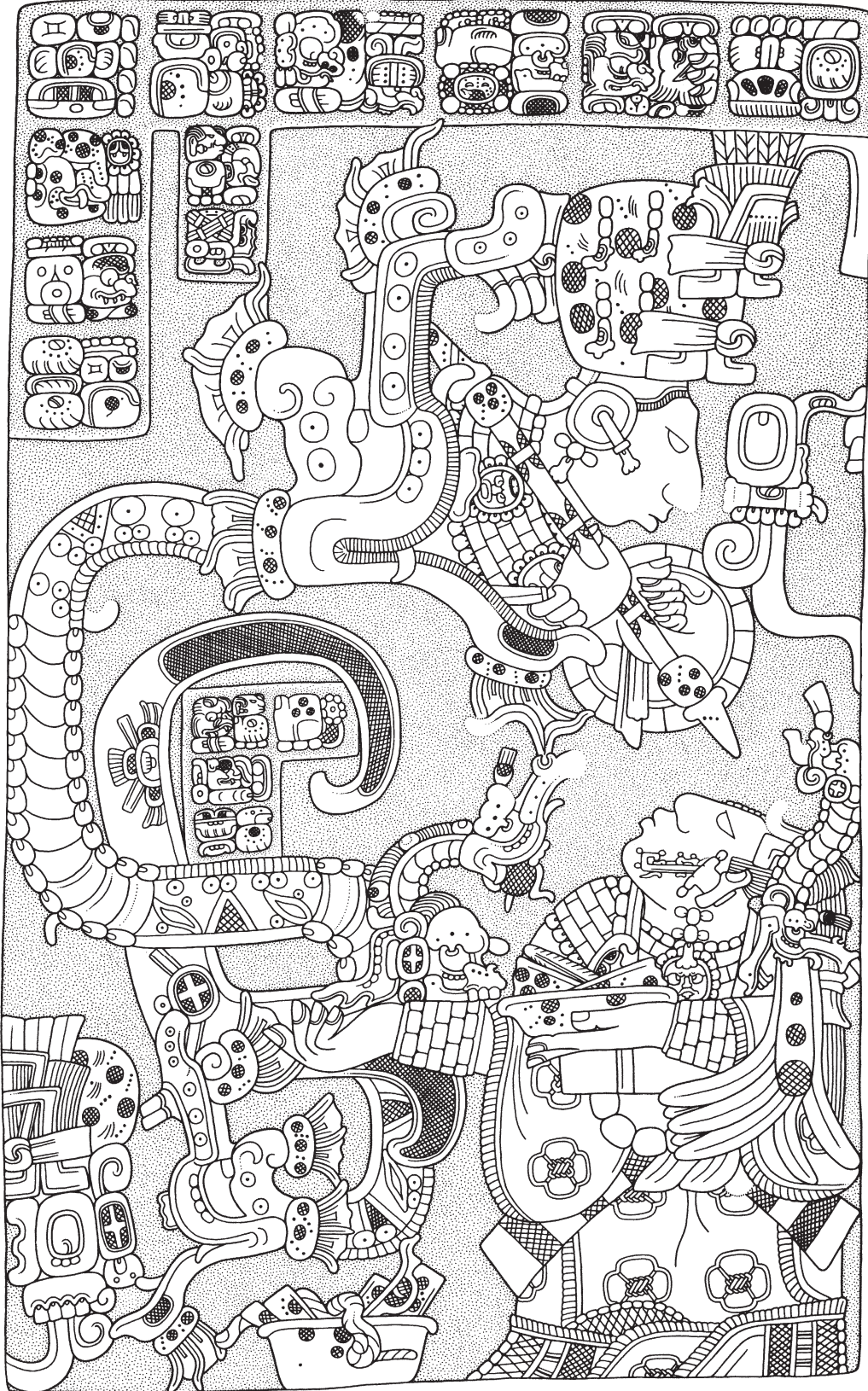


Figure 5. Yaxchilan Lintel 25. Drawing by Ian Graham © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 2004.15.6.5.22.

these new devices would be. He enthusiastically embraced computers, however (again reflecting his old love of electronics), and by the time I was working with Ian in our shared Corpus office, he would spend many hours on his Apple Macintosh, writing chapters of his planned autobiography. This was later published in 2010 as *The Road to Ruins*, a highly entertaining account of his life-long adventures (Graham 2010).

On a personal note, I had the tremendous honor, luck, and pleasure to know Ian in his later years, both as a colleague and as a friend. When in Cambridge I would occasionally visit the office he shared with Tatiana Proskouriakoff, then on the fifth floor of the Peabody Museum. In 1993 Ian hired me as his assistant—a true dream job for an epigrapher. As a result, Ian and I spent a good deal of time together in remote areas of the Maya world, often in the company of his trusted Petenero field assistant, Anatolio López. We teamed up for some weeks in the vast ruins of Calakmul, photographing and drawing the innumerable stelae there. The experience was unforgettable, with long days cleaning and drawing sculptures by day and wonderful evenings listening to Ian's stories over dinners of tortillas and sardines (a favorite of Ian's). One day I remember we were hit with a strong and unexpected *norte*—a cold weather front that changed the steaming rain forest into a misty, chilly, and eerie place, quieting all the birds and animals around us. We weren't prepared for the cold at all, and the nights were especially miserable. Ian and I shared a room at the site's camp house, thanks to the hospitality of the head archaeologist Ramón Carrasco, but we had between us only one very light sheet for a blanket. (We did in fact have two sheets, but we had used one as a reflector for some of our photography of Calakmul's monuments, and I think we must have destroyed that one after a week or so, not thinking much of it). When the cold descended on us, Ian insisted I use our single remaining sheet so I could keep some semblance of warmth. Ian had his own solution: "Ah, but I can use the pages of my newspaper!" I remember him saying with some enthusiasm. I wasn't sure what he meant by this until I saw him reach into his sack and bring out a week-old issue of the *Diario de Yucatán*, separating its many sheets and carefully placing four or five of them over his very extended body as he lay down to sleep. He seemed genuinely proud of his ingenuity, and off we drifted to sleep. At least Ian did. All I can remember of that night was the constant noise of crinkling, crumpling paper as Ian tossed and turned to keep warm. It was a sleepless night for me. But I'll always carry with me the sight as dawn broke of Ian Graham, the great jungle explorer, covered head to foot in newspaper, deep asleep. We next shared a tent a few years later, when Ian and I paid a visit to San Bartolo. It was cold once again, and of course Ian arrived without a proper blanket. But he was ready in his own way, for he had a newspaper in hand, a special Sunday issue

of *Prensa Libre*. I knew I was in for a long night.

Of our joint adventures perhaps the most memorable was our 1997 expedition to an intriguing new site we would together name La Corona. This soon was proven to be the source of many looted sculptures that had come to be known as "Site Q." Our journeys together are now precious memories, and few though they were they provided me with a glimpse of Ian's life as a discoverer and adventurer in the old romantic sense, a true successor to the great explorers of the nineteenth century, and without doubt the last of a kind.

Ian stopped traveling in the Maya world in 2009, his last field visit being once again to Yaxchilan. There he had come full circle in a way, having first been attracted to the Maya area by hearing stories of this great Maya city, and devoting so much of his field work to the documentation of its monuments. The Corpus project, now under the direction of Barbara Fash, continues with more fascicles on Yaxchilan, La Corona, and other sites now in preparation.

Ian received numerous deserved honors and awards throughout his later career. One of the very first MacArthur Prize Fellowships was awarded to him in 1981, and Tulane University bestowed an honorary doctorate in 1998. In 2001 he was awarded the Orden del Pop by the Museo del Popol Vuh in Guatemala, and soon afterwards he received the Orden del Quetzal, the highest honor awarded by the Government of Guatemala. In 2004 the Society of American Archaeology honored Ian with its Lifetime Achievement Award.

It is worth reiterating that Ian's transformative role as a documentarian and explorer was always difficult to reconcile with the professionalized academic world of late twentieth-century archaeology. He held no advanced degree, never taught a course, and never expressed much interest in interpreting his remarkable finds. It was an untethered existence by necessity, allowing Ian to focus on exploring, preserving, and recording sites and monuments. And yet the singular importance of the Corpus project, with its focus on pure, old-school data-gathering, also posed certain challenges when it came to funding and institutional support. Harvard never directly contributed funds to Ian's fieldwork, and without overarching "research questions" and theorizing, traditional grants were often hard to come by. It is an irony that is still very much with us today, with key data-gathering and efforts at preservation lacking the support they need. Basic, fundamental endeavors like the Corpus project must be funded well, for they create legacies that will last decades if not centuries. All too often they take a distant back seat to more monied research projects that are short-term, heavy on theory, and potentially light on long-term relevance. Ian's contributions were hard to categorize within the institutions of modern academia in the United States, but they were basic and will forever live on.

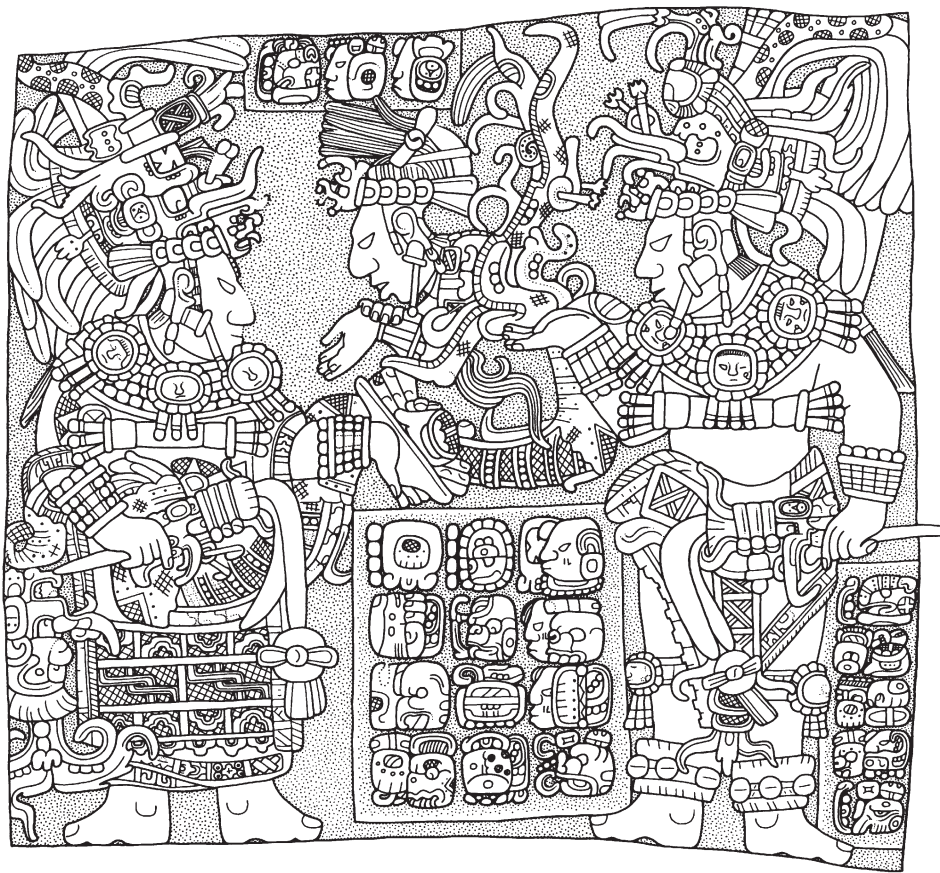


Figure 6. Yaxchilan Lintel 14. Drawing by Ian Graham © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 2004.15.6.5.13.

Ian's "entering the path," to use a Classic Maya expression for death, came several years after the onset of Alzheimer's disease. He had returned to England and resided once more at Chantry Farm, unable to go to the field or even to make new drawings. His retirement put an end to nearly five decades of dedication and work that brought to light the precious records of an entire civilization, sealing a legacy that can never be equaled. His adventurous life will forever stand as one of the greatest in the history of archaeology.

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