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* (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-
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 más 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 chrono-centric 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.3 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.3 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 (1730) 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…

3 Vay is the nickname of Sylvanus Griswold Morley.

3 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).
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 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 for Stela 6 which
you propose; I usually write them in Vay's book if there are changes proposed. All I
have is a query mark against the 10 Imix 4 Zip reading, indicating that I was dis-
satisfied 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 notes.

I am inclined to believe that both these dates are determinants for 9.12.

9.0.0, an earlier poor one and a later very good one:
Corrections by Gregorian for
9.12.0.7.0 is 187.5 days, 376 days since elapsed
Therefore 8 Yaxkin + 183 = 16 Fax or 5 Fax + 183 = 8 Yaxkin.

9.11.12.7.2 is 8 years earlier, so correction should be 185.5
9.12.11.13.1 is 11 years later, so correction should be 191 days

10 Fax + 183 = 8 Yaxkin
8 Yaxkin + 191 = 19 Fax

Your accession theory is an interesting one, but it makes very long reigns.
I calculate that the last 8 Aztec rulers from Acamapichtli 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. This, of course,
in no way affects your general 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 troubles of the Stuart period. The Commonwealth as a reign, from 1649 (James 1)
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 Ista. I wrote back to ask what the heck was
Ista, 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!
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 Mays 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 Tikal was 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 fourteen (packs) 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 Uage book, out in U.S.A., but no copy has yet reached me.

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

Yours

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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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Dear Tania: Many thanks for your letter May 1st. I was very glad to hear of your progress in the “decipherment”, it will glad to hear of your progress in the “decipherment”. 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 public,
and from the record their wars, triumphs & disasters! However, our theories are made to be upset, if you can, or I shall say, have
embarked the problem, it will be a huge stride forward.

I send the material for the “Toothache” or unexplained long
signs. Unfortunately, I cannot yet give you material on the
signs. I have no time to record until I get the
press in to my drawings back for Avis. I have written her
but as I’ve had no reply I fear she may be sick again.

If no case, I am afraid I will not be able to give you
all the occurrences, for if the sign is allowed to settle, or for whatever
reason, it will be necessary to have the long signs
in the “Toothache” print, I would not be able, at present, to have it, as
my crosses now all the signs are signs that I have not been able.
However, I will do all I can to prepare the long signs
in my crossings.

I should certainly favor using “Toothache” signs in print, for it
is a fine descriptive sign & enables anyone to identify & reach the sign.

Univ. of Oklahoma Press is going to bring out a second
eDITION of “Maya Hiero. Writing & introducing at the end of this
year. I’ve read them & think they will close their collective
year with the Ventana, but they are decided to go ahead, so
the shut is lost. I am going to write a
new & useful new sign to the new edition, 2 in that I want to summarize
the page prepared for the new edition, in that I want to summarize
what has been done in Maya hieroglyphic writing 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 Meeting in Mexico City, let me know what it is so that I can mention that it is 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. It shall be written in the future least 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, apples etc. in full bloom. I used to cherish a fragile spring I forget we met in Harvard, Mass., but last it gained everywhere as a weed & I have to mold up masses of it. On the other hand, I proudly display a Sumac, which in New England is a weed. The moral of this I leave to you to decipher.

I haven’t heard from T. for a long time. I heard some jade had been found at Tikal, but no details.

I hope that the latter will cross me bringing me the plaster casts of my glyphs. I write Henry about a week ago about them & failed to get any reply from Aves.

Good luck to your dynasty investigations.

Eve

The keys to the distribution sheets enclosed as usual.

Mary Himes, Tenx.

P.S. Would you mind asking Stela why in any such cases call for a registry annual Peabody or 10 Tribes. One in the publications I never expected never arrived. A hundred letters I sent I have been told 10 Tribes never.
Figure 6. Letter by J.E.S. Thompson May 7, 1959, page 3 (photo by Carl Callaway courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives).
Figure 7. Letter by J.E.S. Thompson May 7, 1959, page 4 (photo by Carl Callaway courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives).