

Correspondence between Frans Blom and Yuriy Knorozov Archived at the Na Bolom Museum in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico

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Recently, the administration of the Na Bolom Museum, founded by the renowned archeologist Frans Blom in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, began a project to systematize the museum's archives in order to facilitate access by researchers interested in the legacy of Blom. During the project, archival work unearthed several invaluable documents regarding an almost unknown aspect of Blom's academic interests and the general history of the decipherment of Maya writing, i.e., Blom's correspondence with Yuriy Knorozov, the Russian decipherer of Maya writing.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Blom had been in favor of implementing a phonetic linguistic approach to the problem of the decipherment of Maya writing, an idea that ran counter to the then-mainstream interpretations. He even claimed that Diego de Landa's "alphabet" was a key piece for deciphering Maya writing (Coe 2017:8; Leifer et al. 2017:183), which at the time foreshadowed Knorozov's later decipherment. In fact, Blom was certain that it would soon be confirmed that Maya glyphs represented sounds (Leifer et al. 2017:184), which he pointed out in several of his own letters and documents, one of these being *The Conquest of Yucatan* (Blom 1936:112-113). For this reason scholars wondered what would have been Blom's reaction to Knorozov's decipherment (Nielsen 2003:5). As we shall see in what follows, based on the documents discovered at Na Bolom, Blom enthusiastically welcomed Knorozov's work.

The documents uncovered include letters and several publications that were signed and donated by Knorozov to the Na Bolom library. The discovery of these materials was indeed a pleasant surprise for me, since I had the good fortune of meeting Knorozov and even holding long and enlightening conversations with him on a range of topics in his St. Petersburg apartment. Na Bolom's collection also includes additional publications by Knorozov obtained through other channels, as well as Blom's correspondence with some scholars regarding Knorozov's decipherment of Maya writing. I shall discuss below the details and meaning behind this brief exchange between Blom and Knorozov based on the letters and documents that were recently discovered. By the content of the discovered correspondence it is evident that there were more letters that unfortunately are lost. In the appendix at the end of this article, I list the complete collection of letters and documents regarding

Knorozov that are currently archived at the Na Bolom library.

I should point out that one of Blom's projects was to start a center for specialized research at his home in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. An important component of his plan was establishing a library that housed studies not just on archeology and anthropology, but also other fields having to do with Chiapas and Guatemala. The library was open to all interested scholars, and in fact over time countless researchers from Mexico and other countries would pay it a visit. In order to launch his initiative, in the early 1950s Blom began to solicit book donations from friends, scholars, educational centers, and government offices, all of which responded enthusiastically (Brunhouse 1976:202-209).¹ Knorozov was one of the scholars to whom Blom reached out.

According to the correspondence that surfaced at the museum, Blom's interest in Knorozov's work began with a letter he received from historian Charles Upson Clark. Blom periodically corresponded with Clark because at the time Clark was undertaking research in European collections, and consequently Blom asked him to bring to his attention any documents he came across having to do with the history of Chiapas (Brunhouse 1976:203). It was in Europe that Clark learned of Knorozov's famous article entitled in Russian "Drevnaja pis'mennost' Tsentralnoj Ameriki" ("The Ancient Writing of Central America"), published in the *Sovietskaja Etnografija* journal in October 1952. In this paper, Knorozov discusses for the first time the results of his decipherment studies based on Landa's work. Clark shared his finding with Blom in a report dated April 1953.²

Immediately after receiving Clark's information, Blom wrote to the USSR embassy in Mexico City asking for information regarding Knorozov's paper. The Soviet cultural attaché in the Mexican capital at that time, Alexander Melnikov, answered Blom's letter on July 10, 1953, and sent five copies of the *Boletín de Información de la Embajada de la URSS* published in May 1953. This

¹ In addition to Blom's biography by Robert Brunhouse (1976), see also a more recent biography by Tore Leifer, Jesper Nielsen, and Toke Sellner Reunert (2002, 2017).

² Clark, Charles Upson. Report for April 1953, p. 2. Na Bolom Archives.

12 September 1955.

Dr. V.V. Knorozov.
Biblioteka de l'Academie des Sciences.
Ulitsa Frunza 11.
Moscow. U.R.S.S.

My very esteemed colleague in Maya studies,

From Dr. Charles Upson Clark, North Hatley, Quebec, Canada, I have heard about your your recent publications which you so kindly have sent to him, and being an ardent student of things Maya I am much interested in seeing these. Unfortunately I do not read Russian any more; none the less I should like to have a copy of your article in "Soviet Ethnology, 1955, 1. as well as your "Brief summary of the studies of the ancient Maya hieroglyphs in the Soviet Union". In short, I am very much interested in becoming acquainted with your work.

By separate mail I am sending you a copy of a map which I have compiled of the Lacandon Forests of Chiapas. This has recently been printed by the government of Mexico. It is the results of more than 20 years of field observations, and contains much data which does not appear in other places.

Enclosed you will find a circular which will give you an idea of what I am organizing here in the old Spanish colonial capital of Chiapas. Already after five years I have built up a good library and many groups of scientists are now coming to consult this and to make use of my knowledge of the country. If I in any way can be of use to you in your studies I hope that you will let me know.

Yours very sincerely

You can write to me in Spanish, French, English and German.
My nationality is Danish-Mexican.

Figure 1. Letter from Frans Blom to Yuriy Korozov, September 12, 1955.
Photograph published with the authorization of the Asociación Cultural Na Bolom.

publication included Knorozov's paper "La antigua escritura de los pueblos de América Central," which was none other than the Spanish translation from the Russian of "The Ancient Writing of Central America."³ Two years later, on September 12, 1955, Blom wrote to Clark, then in Canada, to mention among other points that he received several copies of the translation published by the Soviet embassy in Mexico City and that he sent them to colleagues in the United States. He also mentioned that he had decided to write to Knorozov himself to request donations of his other publications for the Na Bolom library.⁴

That same day Blom wrote to Knorozov.⁵ He asked for copies of two of his newest works published in 1955 in which Knorozov developed his ideas: "Brief Summary

of the Studies of the Ancient Maya Hieroglyphs in the Soviet Union / Kratkije itogui izuchenija drevnej pis'mennosti maya v Sovetskom Sojuze" (a bilingual English-Russian edition) and, in Russian, "Pis'mennost' drevnikh maja" ("The Writing of the Ancient Maya"). In exchange, Blom offered Knorozov a copy of his map of the Lacandon jungle. The letter, written in English, reads as follows (see Figure 1):

³ Letter from Alexandr M. Melnikov to Frans Blom, July 10, 1953. Na Bolom Archives.

⁴ Letter from Frans Blom to Charles Upson Clark, September 12, 1955. Na Bolom Archives.

⁵ Letter from Frans Blom to Yuriy Knorozov, September 12, 1955. Na Bolom Archives.

12 September 1955.
Dr. Y.V. Knorozov.
Bibliot[hè]que de l'Acad[é]mie des S[c]iences.
Ulitza Frunza 11.
Moscov. U.R.S.S.

My very esteemed colleague in Maya studies,

From Dr. Charles Upson Clark, North Hatley, Quebec, Canada, I have heard about your your [sic] recent publications which you so kindly have sent to him, and being an ardent student of things Maya I am much interested in seeing these. Unfortunately I do not read [R]ussian any more; none the less I should like to have a copy of your article in *Soviet Ethnology*, 1955, 1. as well as your "Brief Summary of the Studies of the Ancient Maya hieroglyphs in the Soviet Union". In short, I am very much interested in becoming a[c]quainted with your work.

By separate mail I am sending you a copy of a map which I have compiled of the Lacandon Forest of Chiapas. This has recently been printed by the government of Mexico. It is the results [sic] of more than 20 years of field observations, and contains much data which does not appear in other places.

Enclosed you will find a circular which will give you an idea of what I am organizing here in the old [S]panish colonial capital of Chiapas. Already after five years I have built up a good library and many groups of scientists are now coming to consult this and to make use of my knowledge of the country. If I in any way can be of use to you in your studies I hope that you will let me know.

Yours very sincerely

You can write to me in [S]panish, [F]rench, [E]nglish and [G]erman. My nationality is [D]anish-[M]exican.

Knorozov replied to this letter a month later, on October 14, 1955, mailing Blom a copy of his translation into Russian of Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, published in 1955 (Figure 2). The translation included as an introductory article Knorozov's doctoral dissertation in Russian, "Soobschenie o delakh v Yukatane Diego de Landa kak istoriko-etnographicheskij istochnik," which he defended in Moscow on March 29, 1955 (Coe 1992:159, 2011:16; Yershova y Dolgova 2018:30). The copy of the translation was dedicated by Knorozov to Blom with the following words in Spanish: "A mi ilustre colega Sr. Dr. Frans Blom. Y. Knorozov. 5/X 1955" [To my illustrious colleague Dr. Frans Blom. Y. Knorozov, October 5, 1955].

The following year, in March 1956, Knorozov sent the two documents requested by Blom. Knorozov also sent a third document, a bilingual edition, "Sistema pis'ma drevnikh maja / La escritura de los antiguos mayas," also published in 1955. As he had done previously, he

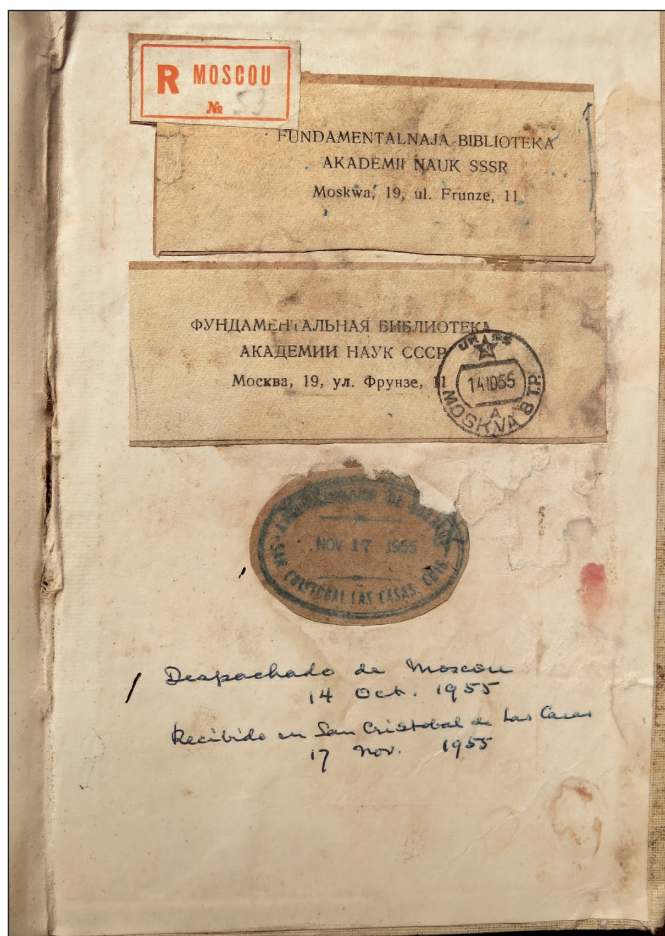


Figure 2. Postmarks on the copy of Knorozov's translation of *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*. Photograph published with the authorization of the Asociación Cultural Na Bolom.

wrote a dedication in Spanish in all of the donated works: "A mi ilustre colega Sr. Dr. Frans Blom. Cordialmente Y. Knorozov. 20/III 1956" [To my illustrious colleague Dr. Frans Blom. Cordially Y. Knorozov, March 20, 1956]. One of these publications, "Sistema pis'ma drevnikh maja / La escritura de los antiguos mayas," stands out because in addition to Knorozov's dedication a note in Spanish says "Por conducto de José Mancisidor, 13 - abril - 1956" [Delivered by José Mancisidor, April 13, 1956].

José Mancisidor, a well known left-wing writer and historian from Veracruz, Mexico, traveled several times to the USSR. He presided over the Mexican-Russian Institute of Cultural Exchange (Berrios 1978), which in 1956 published the Spanish translation of Knorozov's article "Pis'mennost' drevnikh maja" ("The Writing of the Ancient Maya"), originally issued, as previously mentioned, in 1955 in Russian (Blom had both versions⁶).

⁶ The Spanish version reached Blom through R. Stavenhagen in July 19, 1956.

Thus, it is not surprising that Mancisidor delivered one of Knorozov's publications to Blom in 1956.⁷ Indeed, it is possible that the other two publications also reached Blom through Mancisidor. Again, on a personal note, I was pleasantly surprised by the appearance of Mancisidor's name in association with Knorozov, since it was in Mancisidor's honor that the Mexico-USSR Institute of Cultural Exchange was founded in Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, where I learned Russian before leaving for the USSR to study history in 1989.

Shortly afterward, on May 22, 1956, Knorozov wrote a letter to Blom that stands out because it demonstrates the information exchange that occurred between both scholars, and because it proves Knorozov's openness to criticism, in contrast to Eric Thompson's visceral reactions. Knorozov availed himself of the opportunity to ask for Blom's help in obtaining additional material on Mayan languages, since Knorozov only had access to the *Diccionario de Motul*. The letter, written in Spanish, reads as follows in English translation⁸ (Figure 3):

⁷ We should also recall that the Blom's wife, Gertrudy Duby, was a friend of left-wing intellectuals in Mexico (Núñez 2015:134).

⁸ Letter from Yuriy Knorozov to Frans Blom, May 22, 1956. Na Bolom Archives. English translation by Diana Rus.

Leningrado.22.5.56

My illustrious colleague!

Permit me to give a thousand thanks for the books you have so generously sent me. I have sent my publications. I hope I will soon be able to send my report from the Americanist Congress. I would appreciate knowing your point of view either by letter or in published form about my method of deciphering Maya writing, as well as your critical observations. You should keep in mind that my articles are somewhat outdated and some of the interpretations have turned out to be erroneous.

As I only have the *Diccionario de Motul* I would greatly appreciate any other sources about Mayan languages (books or microfilms of manuscripts) that you could help me receive.

With great affection and respect to your wife and yourself. Y. Knorozov

Leningrad. 164. Universitetskaya nabereznaya 3.
Institut etnografii Akademii Nauk SSSR. Knorozov, Y. V.

The report Knorozov mentions in his letter is his famous paper presented at the 32nd International Congress of Americanists in Copenhagen in August 1956. Knorozov was able to attend the congress because of his good relationship with A. P. Okladnikov and

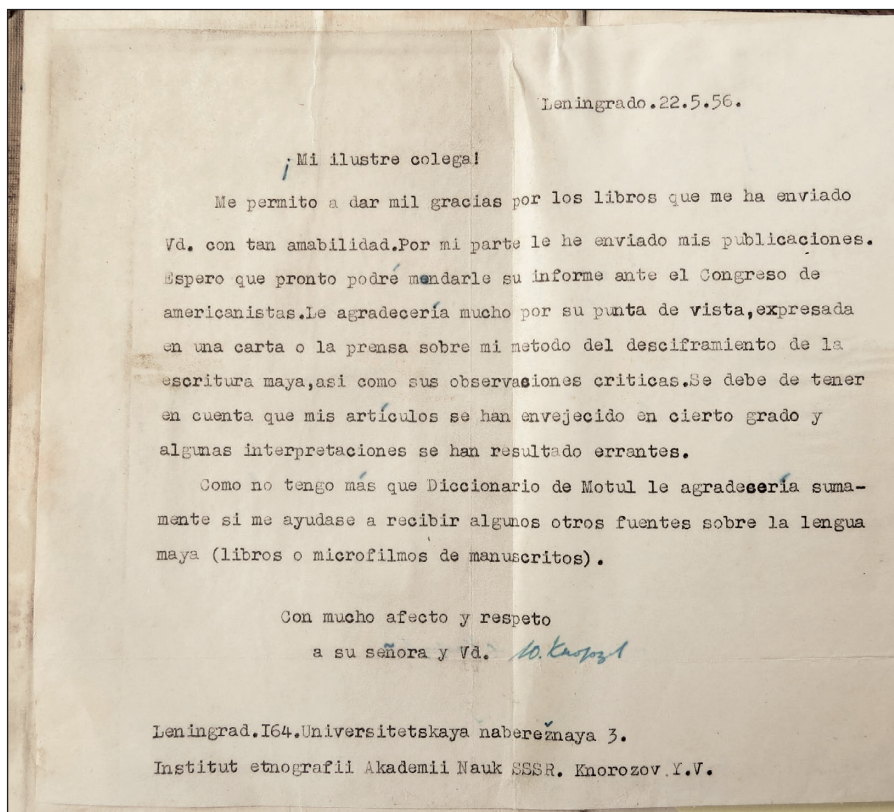


Figure 3. Letter from Yuriy Knorozov to Frans Blom, May 22, 1956. Photograph published with the authorization of the Asociación Cultural Na Bolom.

I. A. Zolotarevskaya, academic authorities who included him in the USSR delegation (Coe 1992:166, 2011:16). The paper stands out because in it Knorozov shows the importance of applying a philological approach to the study of ancient Maya texts (see Sheseña 2016). Knorozov sent to Blom a typed version (in English) of this paper the next year, on March 23, 1957, with the following letter,⁹ written in Spanish and here translated into English:

Leningrado.23.3.1957.

Señor:

Prof. Dr. Frans Blom.

Av. Vicente Guerrero 38.

San Cristóbal Las Casas.

Chiapas. México.

My most distinguished colleague:

I am sending you my report from the 32nd International Americanist Congress. I would appreciate knowing your critical observations of it.

In hopes that I am not asking too much, I send my sincere greeting.

/Y. V. Knorozov/.

Leningrad. B-164.

Universitetskaya nabereznaya 3.

Institut etnografii Akademii Nauk.

Knorozov also sent a condensed version of this paper to Blom, published in Russian in 1956 by the *Vestnik Akademii Nauk SSSR* journal. In addition to the typed manuscript in English, Blom was able to obtain the English versions published both as part of the proceedings of the aforementioned congress and in the *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, which appeared in 1958 and 1956, respectively.

Knorozov's donations significantly enriched the library at Casa Na Bolom. The collection includes other works by and about Knorozov obtained by Blom through donations from other sources. The collection includes, for example, Tor Ulving's article "A New Decipherment of the Maya Glyphs," published in 1955 in the Swedish magazine *Ethnos*, which includes a favorable (and courageous for its time) review of Knorozov's first article (see Coe 1992:165-166). The collection also includes the English translation by Sophie Coe of a monumental book by Knorozov entitled in Russian "Pis'mennost' indeitsev maja" (1963) and in English "Selected Chapters from The Writing of the Maya Indians" (1967).

An outstanding work in Blom's collections is Knorozov's article "La lengua de los textos jeroglíficos mayas," which appeared in Spanish in 1959 in the *Actas del 33 Congreso Internacional de Americanistas* (San José de Costa Rica), in which Knorozov introduces the idea that the Classic-period Maya texts could have been written in the Ch'ol language (Knorozov 1959:577). Later studies made by several scholars placed the language of Classic-period inscriptions in the Ch'olan subgroup of the Mayan

family (see Houston et al. 2000; Law and Stuart 2017).

Another notable article by Knorozov from 1957, also included in Blom's collection, appeared in Spanish in the Soviet journal *Culture and Life* (translation of the original in Russian). The article, titled "La madera parlante" (The Talking Wood), is one of Knorozov's first explorations in the decipherment of the writing of Easter Island (Rongorongo). This article, and others later written by Knorozov on the topic, have been a source of inspiration and ideas for modern scholars who continue to research this writing system of the Pacific Ocean.

Lastly, the Na Bolom library contains the Spanish translation by Galina Yershova and myself of Knorozov's article entitled in Russian "K voprosu o klasifikatsii signalizatsii," which appeared in 1973 in the volume titled *Osnovniye problemi afrikanistiki*. This general semiotics study, previously unknown in the West, discusses the emergence and development of communication and the ways of transmitting and perceiving information. Our translation, "Aproximación al problema de la clasificación de la señalización," was published in 2012 in the *Liminar* journal, a periodical published by the Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas (<http://liminar.cesmecha.mx>).

I doubt that any other collection in Mexico holds all of these writings by Knorozov. My personal library includes most of the publications mentioned herein, gathered during my lengthy stay in the USSR and Russia as a student of history and later as a member of a group of enthusiastic young epigraphers who began meeting in 1997 at the Humanities Building of Moscow State University. Among my young fellow colleagues were Yevgueni Krasulin, Dmitri Beliaev, Albert Davletshin, Alexander Safronov, and several others. A year later, in 1998, those meetings led to the founding of the present-day Moscow Center for Mesoamerican Studies, led by Galina Yershova, at the Russian State University for the Humanities. The presence of the signed typed manuscript of his presentation in Copenhagen, as well as the fact that Knorozov himself donated most of the works, makes the Na Bolom collection unique among its kind.

Interestingly, after having received the books he requested from Knorozov, Blom corresponded with Thompson, sometime between April and May 1956, regarding the exchange of letters with the Russian, even offering to send him copies of Knorozov's work. Thompson already had the translation published by the USSR embassy in Mexico City, and instead asked Blom to send him copies of a "second paper",¹⁰ with which Blom cheerfully complied.¹¹ In this exchange of

⁹ Letter from Yuriy Knorozov to Frans Blom, March 23, 1957. Na Bolom Archives. English translation by Diana Rus.

¹⁰ Letter from Eric Thompson to Frans Blom, May 21, 1956. Na Bolom Archives.

¹¹ Letter from Frans Blom to Eric Thompson, May 25, 1956. Na Bolom Archives.

information, Thompson availed himself of the opportunity to express his displeasure with Knorozov's decipherment. Further, he took advantage of the exchange to (wrongly) accuse Knorozov of having called studies by Western scholars "useless."¹² Blom took these comments with equanimity, did not endorse Thompson's critiques, and limited his comments to noting that Knorozov had requested information regarding Mayan language dictionaries, since he only had access to the *Diccionario de Motul*.¹³ This seems to have ended the exchange regarding Knorozov between the two archeologists.

Robert Brunhouse (1976:226) believes that Blom did not accept Knorozov's decipherment. However, although Blom never published anything backing Knorozov, he does not seem to have expressed disagreement either. What the correspondence found in Na Bolom reveals is that Blom actively contributed to disseminating Knorozov's studies at a historically difficult moment (1953–1955) when mainstream academia positioned itself against Knorozov. He did so surely convinced of the soundness of Knorozov's decipherment and to promote phonetic Mayan-writing studies, a field in which Blom excelled (Coe 2017:8; Leifer et al. 2017:183-184; Nielsen 2003). Moreover, he did so given his integrity as a scientist. This is in essence what he stated in his letter to Clark on September 12, 1955,¹⁴ shortly before contacting Knorozov:

I am most interested in what you tell about Knorozov and his Maya work and I am immediately writing to him, hoping that he also will send his publications to me. Incidentally, several of my worthy US colleagues have been afraid of writing to K. fearing that they might get investigated, etc. K's article in Revista Etnografía Soviética, No. 3, 1952, was translated to Spanish and published here, so I got a dozen copies and sent them to US. To me it's pretty dreadful that one must fear the pressure of ignorance upon free thought.

Due to his advanced age and weak health, Blom no longer had the energy to participate actively in debates about the decipherment (Nielsen 2003:8). Time was running out: He died a few years later, in 1963. Unfortunately, he did not live to see the acceptance that Knorozov's ideas were to have in the coming years. Nonetheless, the future success of the Russian scholar confirmed in the end that Blom had made the wisest decisions, which is in itself a testament to his memory.

¹² Letter from Eric Thompson to Frans Blom, June 12, 1956. Na Bolom Archives.

¹³ Letter from Frans Blom to Eric Thompson, June 22, 1956. Na Bolom Archives.

¹⁴ Letter from Frans Blom to Charles Upson Clark, September 12, 1955. Na Bolom Archives.

Acknowledgments

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Yershova, Galina, and Elena Dolgova
 2018 “Вот всё, что я могу сказать о предлагаемой работе”. Диссертационный диспут Ю.В. Кнорозова. 1955 г. // Исторический архив, No. 5. С. 9–53. (in Russian)

Appendix

Inventory of documents referencing Yuriy Knorozov cataloged at Museo Na Bolom in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico

(Published with the authorization of the Asociación Cultural Na Bolom)

Blom-Knorozov correspondence
Letter from Frans Blom to Yuriy Korozov, September 12, 1955.
Letter from Yuriy Knorozov to Frans Blom, May 22, 1956.
Letter from Yuriy Knorozov to Frans Blom, March 23, 1957.

Knorozov's publications
Materials shown with an asterisk (*) were signed by Knorozov and donated by him to the Na Bolom library.
“La antigua escritura de los pueblos de América Central.” In <i>Boletín de Información de la Embajada de la URSS</i> , No. 20 (484), Mexico City, May 16, 1953, pp. 5-17. Translation of Древняя письменность Центральной Америки // СЭ. 1952. No. 3. С. 100-118.
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(*) Письменность древних майя (опыт расшифровки) // СЭ. 1955. No. 1. С. 94-125.
(*) (Bilingual edition) Краткие итоги изучения древней письменности майя в Советском Союзе / Brief Summary of the Studies of the Ancient Maya Hieroglyphs in the Soviet Union. М.: Изд-во АН СССР, 1955. 53 с. [Доклады (сов. делегации) на X Международном конгрессе историков в Риме].
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<p><i>La escritura de los antiguos mayas</i>. Colección Ideas. Instituto de Intercambio Cultural Mexicano Ruso, México, 1956. Translation of: Письменность древних майя (опыт расшифровки) // СЭ. 1955. № 1. С. 94-125. Translation by Adolfo S. Vásquez.</p>
<p>"La madera parlante. Las inscripciones sobre madera de la isla de Pascua." <i>Cultura y Vida</i>, 3, March. Moscow, 1957.</p>
<p>"New Data on the Maya Written Language." In <i>Proceedings of the Thirty-Second International Congress of Americanists</i>. Munksgaard, Copenhagen, 1958. pp. 467-475.</p>
<p>"La lengua de los textos jeroglíficos mayas." In <i>Actas del 33 Congreso Internacional de Americanistas</i>. San José, Costa Rica, 1959. pp. 573-579.</p>
<p>"Aplicación de las matemáticas al estudio lingüístico." <i>Estudios de Cultura Maya</i>, Vol. III, 1963, pp. 169-185.</p>
<p>"Principios para descifrar los escritos mayas." <i>Estudios de Cultura Maya</i>, Vol. V, 1965, pp. 153-187.</p>
<p>Selected Chapters from <i>The Writing of the Maya Indians</i>. Translation of: Письменность индейцев майя. М.-Л., Изд-во АН СССР, 1963. 663 с. Translated by Sophie Coe. Collaborating editor: Tatiana Proskouriakoff. Russian Translation Series of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of Harvard University, Vol. IV. Published by The Peabody Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967.</p>
<p>"Investigación formal de los textos jeroglíficos mayas." <i>Estudios de Cultura Maya</i>, Vol. VII, 1968, pp. 60-64.</p>
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