

Georges Raynaud: An Overlooked Figure in the History of Maya Epigraphy

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In the wake of the recent interest in the historiography of the study of Maya writing (Coe 1992, Houston et al. 2001) it seems relevant to make a brief mention of some interesting but apparently forgotten contributions to the decipherment of the Maya script by the French scholar Georges Raynaud. Although the present author has so far made little advance in mapping the life and full contributions to Maya studies of Raynaud, it is perhaps worthwhile directing the interest towards this figure such that others, particularly French scholars with better access to the pertinent materials, might become inspired to complete the picture.

Raynaud embarked upon a successful academic career when, in 1894, he received his *Maître de conférences* and became the first Frenchman to pride himself with the official, academic title of “Americanist.” The same year he became secretary of *La société américaine de France* (Eloffe 1893:177). Raynaud was a disciple of Léon de Rosny, and was additionally influenced in his thinking and research design by scholars such as Daniel Brinton and Cyrus Thomas. The period until 1925, when Raynaud’s was appointed *Directeur d’études* at the *l’École des hautes études, Section des sciences religieuses*, his biography is unknown to the present author. Based on personal communication from Peter K. Lehnert (September 2002), however, I may add the detail that Hermann Beyer listened to lectures by Raynaud in Paris during 1907 and shows influence by him in a study of Aztec religion published shortly after (Beyer 1908). Another student of Raynaud’s was the Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899-1974), who was later to become a Nobel Prize laureate in literature. Asturias studied with Raynaud during 1923-28 and in he translated Raynaud’s French *Popol Vuh* translation into Spanish together with the Mexican J.M. González de Mendoza. In 1928, again with González de Mendoza, he furthermore translated Raynaud’s unpublished translation of *Anales de los Xabil*, better known as *Anales de los Cakchiqueles*. Among the References appended to this note the reader will find a preliminary bibliography of Raynaud’s works.¹ The 1893a publication contains a bibliography (Eloffe 1893), which mentions some minor publications not listed in the References below. Eloffe’s bibliography also lists 11 completed, but as yet unpublished manuscripts, in addition to 24 manuscripts in preparation, several of which appear never to have been completed or published.

Although Raynaud seems to be best known for his French translations of K’iche’ and Kaqchikel documents, particularly in their Spanish renderings, he also presented some clever insights into Maya hieroglyphic writing. His contributions in this area are not noted by Coe (1992) or Houston et al. (2001). Indeed, references to Raynaud in epigraphic literature are extremely scanty. The only work by Knorosov that men-

tions him is Knorosov (1963). Although three publications by Raynaud are listed in the bibliography, none of them are actually mentioned in the text, however.² Indeed, the references have been removed from Sophie Coe’s 1967 translation. Similarly, Kelley (1976) lists a couple of Raynaud’s publications, but the imprecise bibliographical data suggest that Kelley did not actually have access to those publications and, again, Raynaud is not mentioned in the body of the book. Nor does Stuart (1995), who is the first modern scholar to appreciate the contributions of another Frenchman, namely Jean Genet, refer to his works. One might perhaps expect the fellow Frenchman Michel Davoust to mention Raynaud in his 1995 book or for Raynaud to be included in the otherwise quite extensive bibliography of Kurbjuhn (1989). But, again, his name fails to appear. Apparently, Raynaud has simply been forgotten.

Raynaud’s major contributions to Maya epigraphy are contained in the small (176 pages) monograph *Les manuscrits précolombiens*, which was published in 1893 when Raynaud must still have been a young scholar. The book represents a study of the three Maya codices, the Tro-Cortesianus (Madrid), the Dresden, and the Paris Codex. Much space is devoted to elucidating the structures of the various almanacs, the meaning of the day names, the relationship between gods depicted in the codices and those mentioned by Landa, as well as the durations and make-up of various calendrical cycles. While the sections dealing with calendrical matters are of lesser historical interest, it is worthy of note that Raynaud manages to debunk a suggestion by Förstemann that the Dresden Codex should really consist of two codices. Raynaud shows how numbers larger than 20 work. He then points out that there is a section of the Dresden Codex, purported by Förstemann to belong to one codex, that counts intervals of 8.2.0 and is thematically related to another section, purported by Förstemann to belong to another codex, which specifies the individual days in a sequence of 8 “years” (or “katuns” as we would call them today) and 2 “months” (or “winals” in current terminology.) On the basis of this observation Raynaud firmly concluded that the Dresden Codex was not composed of two different codices and that the Förstemann edition of the codex should be repaginated in order to accommodate the new insight that it represent a single, coherent manuscript. This insight is acknowledged by Thompson (1950:24) with due credits and accepted in all later scholarship.

Perhaps the most interesting contributions contained in the book relate to the decipherment of individual glyphs. Raynaud was trained within an intellectual climate shaped by de Rosny, Cyrus Thomas, and Daniel Brinton, and, as such, had little doubt that the Maya script was organized in a phonetic fashion. His approach to the Landa “alphabet”

was that this was a “Christianization” of Maya writing, i.e., an attempt to reduce a writing system working on different principles to an alphabet, but that it was nevertheless useful for decipherment purposes. He also seems to have had little doubt about the essential unity of the writing system of Classic Maya monumental inscriptions and that of the codices. Applying a method of structural analysis to the lintels of Yaxchilan, some of which had been documented only a decade before (cf. Charnay 1883), he made the following observation on the Madrid Codex (cf. fig. 1):



En 17 c, comme au verso du même Codex, en 17* b, on trouve un personnage se transperçant la langue ; la comparaison des deux scènes donne le signe  pour le mot Langue. Le signe hiéroglyphique du linteau de pierre de la villa Loreillard, représentant le même sacrifice, semble être 

Fig. 1. Excerpt from Raynaud (1893a:104)

“In 17c [40 in the new pagination], as in the verso of the same codex, in 17 b [96b in the new pagination], one finds a personage piercing his tongue; the comparison of the two scenes gives the sign [illustration] for the word Tongue. The hieroglyphic sign on the stone lintel [nowadays referred to as Lintel 24] of la villa de Loreillard [Charnay’s designation for Yaxchilan] represents the same sacrifice, it appears to be [illustration].”*

Although the currently accepted reading of the glyph that Raynaud refers to is CH’AB ‘penance’ or CH’AM ‘harvest’, whereas another glyph has been identified that represents AK’ ‘tongue’, Raynaud is on the right track. With better attention to the structure of the clauses he might have been able to identify the expression that he focuses on as a verbal one. Apart from his early use of the structural method of decipherment, which was later to be employed in a rather more sophisticated fashion by scholars such as Hermann Beyer and Tatiana Proskouriakoff, Raynaud surprises us by correctly having identified a monumental and a codical variant of the same glyph.

Another surprising insight is contained in the following passage (cf. fig. 2):

“In the scaly-headed parrot that I find in 16c, I strongly tend to recognize the ara and to identify as its Maya name Moo, furnished by 5c, the group [illustration]; the first sign in this group would then be M. (cf. the day [illustration] and the month [illustration] Mol); after that there is a repetition of a variant of the O [illustration] of the Maya-Christian alphabet of Landa. If this reading is good, we would have a new phonetic sign [illustration] Mo or Mu, but since I have not found the group in question elsewhere I do not dare affirm this.”

Essentially Raynaud here deciphers both the sign T582 **mo** and the sign T99 **o**. Before him, Thomas (1988:355-6) had seen the connec-

tion between the depiction of an ara on the same page of the Dresden Codex and the sign sequence that spells *mo*. Although Thomas identifies the expression as representing the word *moo*, he fails to segment the expression into individual signs and refers to the entire sequence as a single “symbol.” More than half a century would pass until Knorosov (1955)—probably independently—made the same suggestions concerning T582 and T99 as Raynaud had made. Although he came much later, it was Knorosov to whom the credits for the discovery have been given.

Methodologically the main thing that is lacking in Raynaud’s approach is a good grasp of the principles of writing systems throughout the world. In the few instances cited he shows himself able to make simultaneous use of the phonetic and the structural approach to decipherment, a kind of methodology which was to prove extremely successful later—especially from the 1970’s onwards. Future investigations into the scholarship of this forerunner of decipherment may show whether or not the general hypothesis of Coe (1992:Ch. 4), namely that Eduard Seler delayed the decipherment of the Maya script by his insistence on semantic approaches to the script, also applies to the case of Raynaud. In any case, it appears that Raynaud somewhat abruptly leaves his epigraphic studies even though he managed to make advances that were many decades ahead of his time. His major work on Maya hieroglyphic writing, *Manuscrits précolombiens*, was published in 1893. At precisely this time Seler’s devastating attacks on Cyrus Thomas and phoneticism appeared (Seler 1893, 1894). Thus, it really does seem that Seler’s position might explain why Raynaud never returned to Maya hieroglyphs after 1893.






pourrait être confondue avec Ahau. Dans le perroquet à tête imbriquée que je trouve en 16 c je suis fortement tenté de reconnaître l’Ara et de prendre pour son nom maya, fourni par 5 c, Moo, le groupe  ; le 1^{er} signe de ce groupe serait alors M. (Comparez le jour  Muluc et le mois  Mol); ensuite le signe répété qui serait une variante de l’O  de l’alphabet maya-chrétien de Landa. Si cette lecture était bonne on aurait un nouveau signe phonétique  Mo ou Mu, mais n’ayant nulle autre part trouvé le groupe en question je n’ose rien affirmer.

Fig. 2. Excerpt from Raynaud (1893a:117)

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(Georges Raynaud, cont.)

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Notes

¹ Eric Taladoire (personal communication, September 2002) has assisted the author in adding several entries to the bibliography.

² I am indebted to Albert Davletshin (personal communication, August 2002) for helping me to search for possible connections between the work of Raynaud and that of Knorosov.