



# Frans Blom and the Decipherment of Maya Writing

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The purpose of the present article is to shed new light on phonetic and linguistic approaches to the decipherment of ancient Maya writing in the late 1920s and early 1930s. During research for a new biography on Frans Blom, published in Danish (Leifer et al. 2002), it became clear that Blom's perception of the writing system of the Maya was in opposition to dominant views of the time. Although Blom never became a pivotal figure in the decipherment, his own ideas and his reluctance to accept the general views of Maya writing of the time offer an interesting perspective on different academic "camps" in Maya hieroglyphic studies. Blom's ideas also appear to have influenced Benjamin Lee Whorf's unsuccessful attempt at a phonetic decipherment in 1933. Most importantly, however, Blom's brilliant intuition and approach foreshadowed later and more successful approaches to the decipherment of ancient Maya writing.

## A Brief Biographical Sketch of Frans Blom<sup>1</sup>

Frans Ferdinand Blom was born in Copenhagen in 1893 into a bourgeois family of wealthy merchants. The young Blom did not, however, wish to follow in the footsteps of his father. He attended the University of Copenhagen with the intent of studying art history but had very little success in this and soon dropped out after receiving low grades. After years of spending too much of the family's money in elegant cafés he was sent to distant Mexico in February 1919 on a one-way ticket to learn how to make a living on his own. After some time in Mexico, Frans got a job in the oil industry in Minatitlán in Veracruz. This, however, proved an unrewarding job, as Blom had always been more attracted by art, culture and languages. In 1922, after having worked for various oil companies in southern Mexico, Blom, at the age of 29, finally found his way into Maya archaeology. During the previous two years Blom had spent con-

siderable time taking notes on the Pre-Columbian temple mounds and stelae he encountered on his expeditions in the more-or-less uninhabited areas of lowland Veracruz, Tabasco and Chiapas. Blom's growing interest in archaeology is well-documented in an edited collection of his letters and diaries published in Danish (Blom 1923).<sup>2</sup> In the summer of 1922, Blom managed to get a job as an assistant for the eminent Mexican archaeologist Manuel Gamio in the Dirección de Antropología in Mexico City, and shortly after he sent his drawings of Tortuguero Stela 1 to Sylvanus G. Morley. From December 1922 to March 1923 Blom worked (on his own) in Palenque surveying the site and writing a report on what could be done to protect the already famous ruins (see Blom 1982). Morley became so impressed by the drawings and Blom's notes on the ruins – as was Alfred M. Tozzer of the Harvard University – that they both assisted Blom in receiving a scholarship to study archaeology at Harvard over two semesters (1923-1924). At Harvard, Blom studied under Tozzer and got together with Oliver G. Ricketson to work on a joint master's thesis which eventually became *Index of Ruins in the Maya Area* (Blom & Ricketson 1925). In the winter of 1924, Blom, Ricketson and Monroe Amsden went to Uaxactun in the Petén rainforest of Guatemala to prepare the excavations of the Carnegie Institution that were scheduled to begin the following year (see Black 1990). Blom ended up doing much of the job at Waxactun on his own, and it was during his two-month stay here that he made his discovery of the function of the E-Group as an astronomical observatory (Blom 1924).<sup>3</sup> Later the same year Blom joined the excavations of Pueblo Bonito in New Mexico as part of his training as an archaeologist. Soon after finishing his MA in the fall of 1924, Blom got a position at the newly established Department of Middle American Research at Tulane University in New Orleans, where he worked

under William Gates (see Brunhouse 1975:129-167; Leifer et al. 2002:163-166). Early in 1925 Frans Blom, accompanied by Oliver La Farge, set out on a long expedition that took him through southern Mexico and highland Guatemala. The discoveries and experiences of the journey were later published in *Tribes and Temples*, probably Blom's most famous publication (Blom & La Farge 1926-27). In 1926 the troublesome Gates was ousted from Tulane and Blom became director of the department – a position he was to hold until 1940.

What is worth noting in Frans Blom's career as a Mayanist and in his publications is his broad approach to Maya culture – both ancient and modern. He had strong interests and conducted research both in archaeology and ethnohistory as well as in ethnography. In this he was undoubtedly inspired by his good friend and mentor Alfred V. Kidder, who was celebrated for developing and encouraging interdisciplinary projects. Furthermore, Blom's friendly relation with the ethnohistorian Ralph L. Roys (who was affiliated with Blom's department for a period) made him deeply interested in and acquainted with the rich ethnohistoric sources that would offer several leads to an understanding of the ancient writing system.

### **Blom's Attempt at Hieroglyphic Decipherment**

In the 1920s when Blom got seriously interested in the Maya hieroglyphic writing system, the established view on the subject was that the writing system did not include signs that expressed sound or phonemes, but rather consisted of ideograms or logograms. Also, the inscriptions were believed to contain, not historical information, but references to calendrical and astronomical observations. The main figure behind this ruling consensus was the great and highly respected Maya scholar Sylvanus G. Morley (Coe 1992; Houston et al. 2001). Alternative approaches to the understanding of the writing system had failed, and it appears that by 1927 few American and English scholars were looking for phonetic signs and historical substance in Maya script.

From his first encounters with Maya inscriptions, Frans Blom developed a special interest in the enigmatic signs, and his 1922 drawing of the stela from Tortuguero was a turning point in his life. In an early letter to Morley, Blom says: "Have you ever had the feeling that the whole thing is so very near our reach, just like a dog that looks at you and wants to tell you something, but can only speak with its eyes? That's how I have often felt

these days, when staring, my eyes tired, on Maudslay's drawings and photographs" (cited in Brunhouse 1976: 32). Although initially trained and inspired by Morley, Blom quickly came to regard his methodology and entire conception of the writing system and its function as a dead end, and thus looked for other avenues of research. In 1929 he wrote: "It is all very well to know that the Maya carved calendrical hieroglyphs in stone and wood, but that does not give us a picture of the Maya culture as a whole, nor does it tell us how they lived" (Blom 1929: 3). To Thomas Thomsen, curator of the Ethnographic Collection at the National Museum in Denmark, Blom wrote about Morley: "This is the weakest side of Morley. He is only interested in the hieroglyphic inscriptions, in fact only in the first part of them. He has travelled around the Petén over the last 8 years collecting inscriptions (he's a genius at reading them), but hasn't measured as much as a single structure or picked up a sherd."<sup>4</sup> Apparently, this somewhat narrow-minded approach did not appeal to the overtly anti-authoritarian Blom and his interest in a more holistic understanding of the ancient Maya. Only by being familiar with many different aspects of Maya culture would it be possible to "crack the code". Undoubtedly, Blom also had other ancient writing systems in mind when he approached Maya glyphic texts. With his wide knowledge of other ancient civilizations and their means of written communication, to Blom there was something deeply strange about a writing system that only conveyed dates.

Furthermore, Blom's language skills (he read and spoke English, German, French and Spanish) allowed him to read earlier hieroglyphic studies in tongues other than English. Thus, he could read ideas about phoneticism and historical content in Maya writing put forth by French scholars León de Rosny and Jean Genet (Houston et al. 2001:77-88; 282-298). Genet's ideas were well-known to Blom, and they seem to have known each other through sustained correspondence (see Blom 1934; 1935). Another powerful sign of Blom's opposing view on the nature of Maya writing appears to have been the decision in 1927 to employ the German-born scholar Hermann Beyer as the hieroglyphic expert at Tulane (Thompson 1959; Stuart 1992:32-33; Houston et al. 2001:156; Leifer et al. 2002:207-208). Beyer believed Maya glyphs to be ideographic (a view Blom did not share), but, more importantly, he searched for historical content in the inscriptions and focused on non-calendrical decipherment. As a result, he represented an alterna-

tive approach to Morley's dominant, almost orthodox, view on Maya writing.

In 1928, Blom's interest in Maya writing had intensified, and a letter to Kidder from December that year shows that he was now working seriously on understanding Maya writing. After discussing Hermann Beyer's opinion on the glyphs being ideographs, Blom writes:

Personally I lean towards the idea that the glyphs express sound. The Maya language contains comparatively few basic sounds which express different things according to slight variations in accent. Roys has remarked on this fact in a footnote to one of his papers, and I have a hunch that the many pre-, sub, post and other fixes which we so frequently see in the glyphs have something to do with this. I have a collection of material toward the solution of this problem, but as yet I am not satisfied with the results. I firmly believe that we have reached the point in our studies of Maya hieroglyphs where we must have a proper knowledge of Maya linguistics before we can carry on. [...] Another question worries [sic] me. Did the ancient Maya priesthood have a hieratic language, just as now-a-days the Catholic Church uses latin freely. Many things like that are troubling me, and I am ploughing my way through Chilam Balam's [sic] and other documents in hopes to see the light some day. I do not occupy myself much with the calendrical glyphs but leave that to those who are already well tangled up in that matter.<sup>5</sup>

In these few lines Blom presents several important suggestions. To begin with, he seems convinced that the glyphs represent sound (as others before him). He firmly believed that the writing system was at least partly phonetic, and, as we shall see, he had no doubts that Landa's "alphabet" would provide a crucial key to decipherment, views he shared with earlier scholars like Léon de Rosny and Cyrus Thomas (Houston et al. 2001: 77-88, 113-117). Secondly, he points out the necessity of a linguistic approach to the problem – something that few, if any, seriously considered at this time. Blom had earlier planned to stay in Yucatán to learn Yucatec Maya, but had failed to find time for this project. The linguistic approach was a matter that he seems to have shared with Alfred Tozzer. Thus, Houston et al. describe Tozzer as: "one of the few scholars to champion other, more linguistically oriented points of view, perhaps because of his intimate familiarity with Yucatec Maya" (2001:154). Furthermore, Blom raises the question of the presence of a hieratic language in the ancient script. This is an issue which has only recently been raised again by Houston,

Stuart and Robertson (1998:294; Coe and Van Stone 2001:15). Finally, it is clear from the quote above that, to Blom, ethnohistoric sources were most likely to provide the decisive lead towards a successful decipherment.

Three months later Blom writes to Roys: "[I] am doing some research in an attempt to prove that at least the five or six glyphs which I am working on are phonetic."<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, we have no evidence of exactly which glyphs Blom was working on. His working notes do not appear to have survived and are not to be found in the archives of the Middle American Research Institute (M.A.R.I.), the Latin American Library at Tulane University or in the large collection of Blom-related documents in the Bancroft Library at Berkeley University.<sup>7</sup> In the letter to Roys he also mentions that he was planning a symposium on phoneticism in Maya writing; apparently La Farge had already written a short paper entitled "Consideration on the role of general Mayan linguistics and the studying of Maya hieroglyphs". There is no evidence, however, that this symposium ever became a reality.

In April 1933, Blom gave a talk at a meeting of the New Orleans Library Club that was later published as an article entitled *Maya Books and Sciences* (Blom 1933). Blom began by stating that: "Those glyphs which deal with other matters [than calendrics], such as history and medicine, are still unintelligible to us" (1933:410). Yet, his intimate knowledge of the ethnohistoric sources, which in several cases revealed that the Postclassic Maya had made use of glyphs to record chronicles about wars, pestilences, famines and other events, had convinced him that the Classic inscriptions recorded the same kind of information by way of a syllabic writing system:

As yet no such records have been read by our scientists, but I feel confident that we are standing on the threshold of the door which soon will open to our full knowledge of Maya writing [...] A study of the Maya glyphs shows us that this system of writing must be among one of the very few original systems developed in our world, and scientists are still discussing whether Maya characters are phonetic or ideographic [...] I think that it ultimately will be shown that Maya glyphs represent sounds, and a single statement in "Relacion de la ciudad de Merida" gives an indication in this direction: "They had characters of which each letter was a syllable and they expressed themselves with these" (1933:413).

The same year another article dealing with phoneticism in Maya writing was published by the linguist

Benjamin Lee Whorf, and it may well be that Whorf's ideas were directly influenced by Blom's. According to Michael D. Coe, Whorf initially became interested in the Nahuatl (Aztec) language in 1928, and only later extended his research to Mayan languages and hieroglyphic writing (Coe 1992:127). From letters in the archive of M.A.R.I. at Tulane University we know that Blom and Whorf corresponded in the first years of the 1930s, and that a linguistic approach to Maya hieroglyphic decipherment was among the topics in those communications.<sup>8</sup> To Blom, Whorf's knowledge of languages was crucial, and the two shared the view: "that Maya writing must phonetically record one or another Maya language" (Coe 1992:131). There can be little doubt that Blom, as the more experienced Maya scholar, encouraged Whorf to pursue his research on glyphs. The result of Whorf's work was presented in 1933 (Whorf 1933; see Coe 1992: 128-131; Stuart 1992:35). Even though Whorf would turn out to be correct in some of his more general ideas about Maya writing and in attributing phonetic values to "certain characters", the article was full of errors and weak arguments (Houston et al. 2001:153).

Soon after, Richard C.E. Long, a partisan of views by Morley and J. Eric S. Thompson, published a series of counterarguments in *Maya Research* (a short-lived journal that Blom edited from 1934-36), and Whorf's ideas and the entire linguistic approach were quickly dismissed and largely forgotten (Long 1934; Coe 1992:129-131). As Houston and his co-authors note: "Benjamin Lee Whorf's unsuccessful efforts seem to have discredited such interest in the language behind the glyphs" (2001:96). After the time of Whorf's ill-fated attempt Blom never really returned to glyphic studies, but he maintained his ideas about the potential gold-mine of information in Maya writing. In his book *The Conquest of Yucatan* (1936), he states that we must "wait until the hieroglyphs have been fully deciphered before we can attempt to write a real history of the Maya" (Blom 1936:v). Later in the same volume, he comments on Bishop Landa's famous "alphabet":

He did not realize that the Maya language is monosyllabic, and that the Maya by their signs expressed sounds rather than letters. They not only expressed sounds, but certain ideas were expressed by certain sounds, and before modern scholars can even attempt to unravel the secret of those most fascinating Maya hieroglyphs, they must not only learn the Maya language, but also must become thoroughly familiar with the Maya process of thought.

The scientist trained with a foundation of European knowledge has absorbed the arrogant idea that his learning is a world pattern, and that it is impossible for other peoples to develop individual lines of thought that amount to anything. Not until he shapes himself to the psychology of the people will he succeed in understanding *them* and their characters. (1936:112).

Blom goes on to predict that Landa's "alphabet", when carefully studied and compared with information from ethnohistoric records and old Maya dictionaries, will be pivotal in deciphering Maya writing. He gives three concrete examples of this:

He said the Spanish *A* (pronounced *ah*) and he repeated it until his informants painted the head of a turtle, which is called *AC* in Maya. He got three signs for *A*, and then turned to *B* (pronounced *bay* in Spanish). Now the sign for a road is the imprint of a human foot, and the word for a road in Maya is *BE* (pronounced *bey*). What could be more natural than that the Maya, slightly wearied by the incessant questioning of the Bishop, would paint the sign for *B* as the sign for a road?

The Bishop was persistent; he worked his way through the whole alphabet, and the Indian informants became more and more impatient. Came the sound for *SH*, like *shee*. To the Maya it sounded like *shay*, and to satisfy the fierce old man, they painted the face of a man, and before his mouth they made little dots. They meant to indicate that the man was vomiting, and when one consults a dictionary of the Maya language one finds that the word for vomiting is *shay*. (1936:112-113).

What is worth noting in this quote is Blom's perceptive way of using and applying Landa to his own broad knowledge of Maya culture and language. The three signs described here by Blom may well have been among those he had earlier (1928-29) attempted to decipher, and although he does not explicitly propose that Landa's "footprint"-sign (T301) is a syllable reading *be*, he may indeed have been the first scholar to suggest that this sign carried the value *be*.<sup>9</sup> However, apart from these sporadic and somewhat detached observations, Blom's lack of discipline eventually did not allow him to delve more deeply into the decipherment of Maya writing.

Frans Blom's interest in Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions continued after his many personal calamities in the late 1930s (divorce, drunkenness etc.) and his subsequent return to southern Mexico in 1943 (Leifer et al. 2002:231-252). By this time, however, his focus seems to have shifted to the discovery and recording of new inscriptions (Blom & DUBY 1957), rather than making a renewed assault on decipherment. This may have

resulted from several things. First, by this time the field was completely dominated by the "anti-historical" view put forth by the Thompson "school" and Blom did not have the energy (or the arguments) to open up the issue of history and phoneticism again. In fact, the descriptions of the hieroglyphic texts presented in *La Selva Lacandona* (1957), which deal exclusively with calendrical glyphs, strongly suggest that at this point Blom had given up his earlier ideas. Second, years of alcoholism had had their impact on Blom: he was no longer at the height of his intellectual abilities and he was never again seriously involved in working with the question of decipherment. Unfortunately we do not know how he reacted when the first groundbreaking publications by Knorozov, Berlin, and Proskouriakoff appeared in the second half of the 1950s. It must, however, have delighted him to see that so many of his old, general ideas about the nature and content of Maya writing were now being revived and backed up by a new host of insights and scientific arguments that he himself had never been able to put forth. Frans Blom died in his home in San Cristóbal de las Casas on June 23, 1963.

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### Endnotes

1. See Leifer et al. 2002, chapters 1-3 for a full description of Blom's early years in Denmark and Mexico.

2. Translated into Spanish and published by the Instituto Chiapaneco de Cultura as *En el lugar de los grandes bosques* in 1990.

3. See Aveni & Hartung (1989) and Aveni et al. (2003) for recent reevaluations of Blom's original hypothesis.

4. Frans Blom to Thomas Thomsen, 24 March, 1924, Waxaktun (The Archives of the Ethnographic Collection, the National Museum, Copenhagen).

5. Frans Blom to Alfred E. Kidder, 1 December, 1928 (M.A.R.I., Tulane University, New Orleans).

6. Frans Blom to Ralph L. Roys, 2 February, 1929 (M.A.R.I., Tulane University, New Orleans).

7. The discovery of a major collection of documents in the Bancroft Library, including photo albums, diaries and letters not known to previous biographers of Blom has contributed significantly to the new biography published in Denmark.

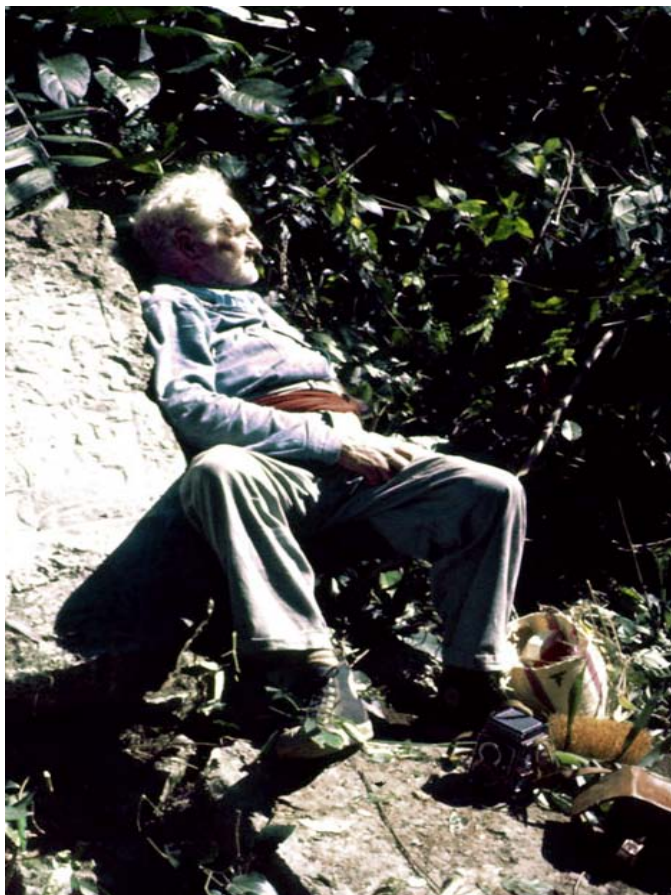
8. Benjamin Lee Whorf to Frans Blom, 23 March, 1930; see also Whorf to Blom, 24 February, 1931 and 27 November, 1933 (all in M.A.R.I., Tulane University, New Orleans).

9. It is far from easy to determine with certainty whether other scholars had already suggested this identification before Frans Blom (see Houston 1989:15). I have not, however, been able to find any earlier than Knorozov's from 1955 (1956 [1955]).

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Blom at Yaxchilan, 1960. Photo: Jim Merrett.