In 2002 the authors and Toke Sellner Reunert published a new, extensive biography on the Maya archaeologist and explorer Frans Blom (1893-1963), the first ever to appear in Blom's mother tongue – Danish (Leifer et al. 2002). Among the many forgotten documents that were rediscovered during the three-year period of research in Denmark, Mexico and the United States were two typescripts of Blom's letters from his stay in Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico; where, from December 14, 1922, to March 14, 1923, Blom carried out one of the first scientific investigations of this important Classic Maya site (see Blom 1982).

The fullest version of the Palenque typescripts is in the archives of the Middle American Research Institute (M.A.R.I.) of Tulane University, New Orleans (the version translated here), and a slightly abridged and re-arranged version is to be found in the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.1 Both typescripts are in Danish and were compiled by Dora Blom, Frans Blom's mother, and originally sent to one or more publishers in Copenhagen.2 Dora had already edited one volume of Frans' letters, published as I de store Skove – Breve fra Meksiko ("In the Great Forests – Letters from Mexico") (Blom 1923)3, and she planned to have a sequel published, entitled Atter i de store Skove ("Return to the Great Forests"). Apart from some excerpts that appeared in a Danish newspaper, this idea never came off.

When Blom, still a young amateur, arrived at Palenque near the end of 1922 he already knew the site from firsthand experience. Earlier the same year, on April 25, Blom had visited the ruins for the first time. (See Figure 1.) He was immediately overwhelmed by the beauty of the place, and although he was officially an oil scout on an oil expedition (see Nielsen 2003 for a short biographical sketch), he spent page after page in his notebook on drawing, photographing and describing the site and its monuments. He carried quite a few archaeological books and maps with him, but he was convinced that many details on the existing maps and plans were wrong and consequently corrected them in accordance with what he saw. "These ruins are full of enigmas and wonders", he wrote in his diary4 – not knowing that he

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1 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 (e.g., Brunhouse 1976) has contributed significantly to the new biography.

2 The M.A.R.I. typescript contains four figures; two photographs of the Palace and two line drawings by Blom, one showing the Oval Tablet (see Figure 2) and one illustrating three examples of glyphs from the Palace.

3 Published in Spanish in 1990 as En el lugar de los grandes bosques by the Instituto Chiapaneco de Cultura, Chiapas, Mexico.

4 From Blom's expedition diary in Danish, March-June 1922. (Latin American Library, Tulane University, New Orleans.)
would eight months later have the opportunity to return and examine them more carefully.

By then, the famous Mexican archaeologist Manuel Gamio of the Dirección de Antropología in Mexico City (whom Blom had been working for since August 1922) had become so convinced of Blom's talent and abilities that in early October 1922 he offered him a job as an archaeological attendant in Palenque. Frans was to spend three months there on his own in order to ascertain what could be done to preserve the ruins. For Frans, who had already been captivated by the haunting spirit of that beautiful place, this job was a dream come true – and the young amateur spent October and November studying the available literature on the subject: "The more I penetrate into the mysteries of the ancient Maya, the more it interests me. I have been reading very diligently lately, working like a little horse – though it's not really hard work when the subject interests you, it's rather a pleasure and a feast."

"First I went through all that I could find that had been published and written about the ruins of Palenque. [...] Maudslay's work should serve as a model and an ideal for archaeologists", Blom wrote in his diary. But apart from the great Maudslay, Blom was certainly not very impressed with all that he read. Many of the available books he dismissed as "fanciful and crackbrained explanations of the history and origins of the Maya. A great part of these was crazy second-hand nonsense." Finally, on December 3, he had his things packed and was all set to leave for Palenque on the following day: "All has now been packed down, and the civilized part of my belongings has been stored in a warehouse. What remains is the camp-bed, a bolt of canvas with my bedclothes, a sack with clothes and boots, two crates of instruments and a large camera. My room is deserted and empty; the door opens – almost – directly into the forests. Tomorrow night begins the journey. [...] Though this city is wonderful, a voice inside me begins to sing of the forests, especially during these last few days."

On December 14, 1922, Frans reached the ruins, and in his diary from that same day he described the horseback ride: "From Palenque cemetery the path leads to the ruins. Quite a good path, through dense scrub. Then you come into an open savannah, and from here you catch your first glimpse of the ruins. The Temple of the Cross shines white against the forest-clad hills. Again you plunge into the forest, you cross several small creeks, then the Mixol river, a clear little mountain stream, and shortly thereafter the Otolum, the creek that comes from the ruins. Soon you reach the foot of the limestone hills. The path rises steeply, and when once again you reach a level path, you are on the plateau where the ruins lie. To the left of the path, the Otolum thunders away, hidden by the forest. By the old Maya bridge over this creek lie two palm-thatched huts, and this is where I've settled." He found the ruins in a sad condition, all covered by vegetation, trees and shrubs. The famous limestone tablets of the Cross Group were covered by humid slime and moss. "These tablets should really be taken to the Museum in Mexico [City], since it's impossible to protect them here. Day by day, year by year, the hieroglyphs and figures are erased. Now they are to be brushed clean, this is all I can do to prolong their life for a little while. Many men and much money could be used in the work to protect these art treasures."

Frans soon launched himself into his job with great enthusiasm, only somewhat delayed by his great love for the profusion of wonderful flowers: "And what a terrible job I had been assigned. Truly, I walked around for days, and couldn't do a thing. Right and left were the old temples, settled in the world's most beautiful forest. Lianas and orchids and other tropical verdure was covering one and all of the buildings. AND, – dam[n] it, – It was my orders and my job to tear down all that floral beauty. [...] Alas, the day came for destruction. There were the temples, and the palaces, and every one of their rooves [roofs] were covered in a solid carpet of wild pink begonias. The butchery started, and with every machete slash my heart was bleeding."

After the flower massacre, work proceeded at a calm and steady pace. In the very meticulous and well-grounded report which Blom later wrote for Gamio, he not only managed to comment on the condition of the ruins and make suggestions as to how and in what sequence the buildings should be excavated and restored, which was what Gamio had asked him to do, but he also provided exact descriptions of the ruins and was the first to describe and map a large part of the site – a map that was only replaced by a new and better one a couple of years ago (Barnhart 2001). Blom only did some minor excavations during his stay, and indeed this was not the official task assigned to him by Gamio (at this point Blom had not yet received any formal training in archaeology), but he was deeply concerned with the future of the ancient city: "I would love to excavate Palenque,

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5 Letter to his parents in Danish, November 5, 1922. (Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley).
6 Diary in Danish, December 14, 1922. (Bancroft Library).
7 Letter to his parents in Danish, December 3, 1922 (Bancroft Library).
8 Diary in Danish, December 14, 1922. (Bancroft Library).
9 Diary in Danish, December 14, 1922. (Bancroft Library).
10 Notes from Palenque in English, ca. 1923. (Bancroft Library).
but how can I do a good and honest job of it? It's going to cost plenty of money. It's not just excavation that counts. One must not destroy; but all should be planned so that the excavation will mean preservation. Thus future generations can learn and benefit from the work. Frankly, – I would rather leave Palenque as a jungle covered pile of broken masonry – than rape it."

Many years later, in the 1950s, Blom told a Danish writer about his work in Palenque: "I traded my oil salary for a miserable salary as an archaeologist. I have never regretted that decision. I was sent to Palenque to measure up the ruins. [...] I made a report of my investigations but it was never printed, for those were the days of the revolution and lead was used for bullets, not for printing" (Ulrich 1956:183). Soon after his return to Mexico City in March 1923, Frans gave the manuscript to Gamio. It was an excellent and thorough work considering that Blom was a mere amateur, and whatever lingering doubts Gamio might have had as to Frans Blom's qualities and potential, they were now dispelled. Blom had passed his first test as a self-taught archaeologist. It was not, however, until 1982 that the report was finally published by INAH (Blom 1982) – a delay of 59 years which was probably due to factors others than the shortage of lead.  

Here finally – with a similar delay of more than 80 years – are the Palenque letters, giving us a glimpse of young Blom's daily life among the ruins of Palenque. Not only do we find impressions of Blom's relationship with the local population and his working methods, but we are also presented with interesting background information on early looting activity in Palenque, the first site "museum" and some of Blom's discoveries at Palenque, including that of a well-preserved red-painted and polished stucco floor in the Temple of the Sun (see also Blom 1982:62) and the uncarved stone column or stela known as "La Picota" (see also Blom 1982:112-113). Thus, in various respects, the Blom letters add new perspectives to the research history of this important Maya site.

The Palace, Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, December 14, 1922.

It is with a proud feeling that I write the heading of this letter. I arrived at the ruins today at about 11 in the morning and got myself installed. At the foot of the main temple is a small Indian hut: this is where I live, and around me rise the thousand year old pyramids and temples. My workmen had hardly finished the job of fitting out the house for me, before I sent them off to open up paths to the most important buildings. So, tomorrow the work can really begin.

And there is a lot to do here. The buildings are in a sad condition. Here and there the wonderful relief figures are flaking off, and trees and bushes are growing in all crevices and cracks. All this has to be cleaned out; supporting beams will have to be put up afterwards, and where the walls are about to collapse some bricklaying has to be done. Years and thousands of dollars could be spent in preventing these buildings from being completely destroyed, and it should be done.

It is wonderful to be back in the forests again. The food tastes of the smoke from the fireplace, and outside the cicadas are singing their evening song. My Indian workers sit outside the hut and tell each other lies and fairy stories, and a couple of small remarks reveal that they are not all that happy about having to spend the night here among the ruins.

By the way, I had quite a dramatic journey down here. The train was derailed twice; I was prepared for some kind of interruption, so I had brought with me a lunch basket. Just as we were moving well ahead I could feel that the train was running off the rails into soft ground and stopped. Soon after followed volleys from rifles and pistols from all sides. I did what every brave man should under such circumstances, I crouched down on the floor of the compartment, I had no intention of putting my head out the window to see what was up. Once the shooting was over I peeked out. The train crew had scared off the attackers, and outside my compartment a couple of them lay dead on the ground; they didn't look too good; one of them had his mouth open and in it shone a large gold tooth. One of the members of the train crew passed by, saw the gold tooth, the rifle butt into the mouth, crack! and the tooth went into the pocket of his waistcoat and he went on. We had to get out of the carriage, walk for a couple of kilometers and wait for a few hours; I enjoyed my lunch basket, great offers were given on the contents of it – but no, it was not for sale. At last another train picked us up. Something similar happened during the middle of the night, once more we had to get out and walk a long distance in pitch-darkness across a swampy terrain, carrying all the luggage, well, mine wasn't very big, but still. We were underway for 40 hours; normally this stretch can be done in 6 to 7.

11 Notes from Palenque in English, ca. 1923. (Bancroft Library).
December 20, 1922.

This is a realm of peace and beauty. New things of interest appear piecemeal, as my Indians clear the forest surrounding the ruins and manage to weed the bushes and plants out of the cracks in the walls and on the roofs of the temples. The ruins are situated on a small, raised plateau, below us the lowlands of Tabasco stretch as far north as the eye can see; behind us, to the south, rise forested mountains.

The more I read about the Mayas, the more familiar I become with their buildings and their works of art, the more I am astonished of the abilities and the high culture of this people.

Already before Cortez arrived here in Mexico, Palenque was in ruins as were other of the great ruined cities which lie hidden in the forests of Chiapas and Guatemala. One after one these sites are visited, one after one they are explored and studied, and step by step our knowledge increases. This people had a fully developed writing system and a calendrical system that greatly surpassed the Gregorian calendar, and in some respects outdid our own.13 And these results were accomplished without the modern instruments of our time. They worked in stone with stone tools, and their renderings of human figures are only surpassed by the Greeks; the Assyrians and Egyptians stood far below the Mayas.

It is a continuous joy to me that I get so well along with the Indians. If you know how to win their friendship, they are hearty in their own shy way.

In the evening after nightfall they silently glide into my hut, they squat down along the wall, and there they sit completely still. If I work, they won't say a word; however, I often talk to them, and little by little I get them to tell me small stories about their legends and their different superstitious beliefs. This, too, is a part of my job and almost the most difficult.

To be continued in the next PARI Journal.

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In memory of Jaime Kibben (1947-2003)

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Editor’s note
As explained by the translators in their introduction to this series in PARI Journal 4(3), the Maya archaeologist and explorer Frans Blom carried out one of the first scientific investigations of Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, from December 14, 1922, to March 14, 1923. This issue continues the publication of his letters from the site.

December 24, 1922

My workmen went off to the village this afternoon to celebrate “Noche Buena”, to them a welcome excuse to have a fiesta and let off fireworks.

The keeper, the archloafer Manuel, went as well; so I am now sitting here, alone in my palm castle. However, I don’t complain, since I have plenty of work to do here. Work progresses well, building after building, temple after temple appears from the forest, and for every building we get cleared there is more work to do. In one place a stucco relief appears, in another place a stone with hieroglyphs. Every new thing must be drawn or photographed. In many places measuring and mapping have to be done. Yesterday, I made a trip up the mountain slopes behind the temple city and came upon a hitherto unknown building—in two stories even, so the entire morning of today went with measuring and drawing a ground plan of it.

“Christmas Eve”, I can’t, however, bring forth any real Christmas mood. The Otolum creek which passes by close to my hut, rushes below the trees, and it is the most wonderful and mild evening. The moon appears between the drifting clouds and lights up the ruined masses of the Palace. It is a somewhat unique experience for a Dane to sit here. I try to imagine you all at home, gathered around the Christmas tree with the grandchildren, candles and tinsel and the presents at the foot of the tree, it works; however, a moment later my attention is caught by the monotonous and shrill singing of the cicadas out there in the tropical night.

January 6, 1923

New Year’s Eve was a doubtful pleasure. In the morning I went off on a fairly long trip into the forests to the coffee plantation of El Encanto. Some really nice Europeans live there; and what attracted me even more, there are some very fine limestone tablets with sculptures, created by the ancient Maya artists. I brought a guide with me; however, the poor creature got so tired that he collapsed just half an hour away from the finca. It was after nightfall and the most wonderful moonlight, and we could easily have reached our goal, if only the brute could have walked on his feet. But he couldn’t be moved. We went to bed in a small shack in a maize field that we were lucky enough to find close by, and while we were sleeping there on the ground—why does the ground always turn the hardest side upwards when one has to sleep on it—the old year slipped away and the new one came without asking. When I have to sleep like this out in the open, I always place my lasso around my bed; the curious thing about it is that the snakes don’t dare crawl across it, just as they don’t dare crossing it if they are inside its circle; what it is that scares them I don’t know.

On the way back from Encanto we had rain, real
tropical rain, and for two days we sat underneath a roof of leaves, caught between two rivers. The waters were rising to the degree that it would be highly dangerous to attempt to cross them, so we simply had to wait until the water level went down again. Yes, these are the small blows that life gives you out here. I was happy to get back my ruins and my cosy palm house.

January 10, 1923

Today Manuel showed up with a solemn look on his face; I could immediately see that he had something special on his mind, presumably some kind of new idea as to how he could slope off from his duties. Then finally he spoke up about his business. He and his friends had reached the conclusion that I must be very lonely and bored living alone in my palm hut, and therefore he had come to offer me his daughter as my wife. I tried to explain to the man that I didn’t need a wife since I travelled from place to place and couldn’t bring her with me. I didn’t need to do that, he felt, since he wouldn’t mind taking her back, he wouldn’t have any troubles getting rid of her again, she was wonderfully fat and she knew how to cook. I had my share of trouble to make him understand that I couldn’t accept his offer in spite of the many tempting qualities of the lady.

The good Indians cannot comprehend how one can live without a wife, because she is the one who has to do all the work, slaving away from early till late, being bullied and getting beaten as well. And Manuel probably had his own interest in providing me with a “wife”, since he would then be able to load a good part of his own work on her. Lazy and sly, that’s what they are, the women have to do all the work, in the house as well as in the field, and if they are travelling she will have to carry the full load. My neighbors, another Indian family, treat me with touching care, it takes time before the natives get used to strangers, but once they’ve realized that you will not harm them and do not shout at them from morning till evening, they become confident and devoted. My mozo in Vista Hermosa, who followed me for a couple of years, was deeply reliable and very devoted, he demonstrated all virtues towards me, although he had the reputation of being “a bad man”, but if you can hook up on a guy like that, then you are safe; when I left for Mexico [City], he returned to his former occupation: arson and murder! Unfortunately, he was a faithful servant, but a grand bandit too; the last news I heard about him was that he had been hanged.

January 14, 1923

Yesterday I had the pleasure of discovering two completely new things: a temple about two kilometers [1.2 miles] away from the main ruins, entirely unknown until now, and a stela, a great stone monument, somewhat further into the forest than the temple.

Otherwise the work takes its normal course. Building after building appears from the dense forest, and when the workmen have finished their job of cutting down the trees and clearing away the bush, I start with knives and brushes to clean the sadly damaged stucco reliefs. These are often covered by a whole web of fine, small roots and pillows of moss. One has to work with the greatest care in order not to destroy anything. Often, when one of these webs of tiny roots has been carefully loosened, the most amazing relief appears, whole figures, created by the hand of a master.

When the cleaning job is done I take photographs. Sometimes, however, there’s no space for me and the camera, and then I’ll have to draw. Occasionally, I have to be lowered by a rope from a steep roof comb to be able to draw up close.

Yesterday I rode to the village to see if any mail had arrived, normally it comes once a week, but this time it had not arrived. How I really enjoy riding off on my own or wandering alone in the forests. The forest is ever new, animals and plants are a most lively and entertaining company. Here and there I come across old Maya walls, small pyramids or heaps of sherds that have been brought to the surface by the rains. I search...
around and find small figurines, fragments of ornamented jars or small whistles of burnt clay. The Mayas were masters in shaping the clay. After such an outing I often return with a whole bag full of what looks like lumps of earth. They are all poured out on the working table and treated with water and old toothbrushes, and many curious details appear. My little museum here grows day by day. These trips into the forest, however, are rare. My main job here is in the ruins themselves, there I measure, draw and take photographs. Often I sit for hours in front of one of the beautiful, carved limestone tablets, go over the thousands of details, one after the other. They are wonderful: worked without the use of metal tools the figures and hieroglyphs stand out sharply and clearly in the stone. The characters are always carved within a square. Temples and figures were all painted, the palette wasn’t large, but the colors were matching; when I uncover the reliefs I often find the colors as clear and bright as they were when they were applied a thousand years ago. Everything is limestone, the calcareous rainwater of centuries has run down walls and ornaments, every raindrop has left behind a little lime and thus many things are covered by a crust several inches thick. I chip away this limy crust and thus many beautiful ornaments see the light of day.

I have had a bad night. I was woken up by a burning pain in my legs, and when I made some light I could see what caused it: foraging ants. The entire floor of my hut was a rolling red mass, I got up in a rush, grabbed my kerosene cans and quickly poured some down my hand. From earlier experience I knew what should be done. I poured out kerosene in a circle surrounding the hut and into the dense, creeping mass of ants, got a few steps away and threw a burning match into the circle. In the next moment a bright fire was burning around my hut; the ants inside the circle seek to get out and burn up, while those on the outside sense the danger and move off in another direction. An hour later I could get back in and go back to bed. On their wanderings the ants eat all the creepy things they come across.

Down in Minatitlan the ants cleaned out the storehouse, the refinery and every other building of all the kinds of tropical vermin, including snakes, scorpions and the more harmless bugs. When they attack snakes they eat their eyes first. If you can’t save yourself as I did on this occasion, there is nothing else to do except lying completely still and they will wander across your body. This may last several hours and it is a tough ordeal. In Minatitlan they were almost considered a wel-

January 22, 1923

Each day I grow even more fond of this place. I walk around the site and dream about what could be done. Here some trees should be cut down, there a good clean-up is necessary. The great heaps of ruins whisper about hidden treasures buried beneath them. In one place there is a long, narrow passage bricked up at one end. What lies hidden behind that wall? Some other place there is a mound. I know that there are burial chambers hidden in that mound. Yet, there are other things that have to be done first. Walls have to be supported, reliefs that are flaking off have to be fixed with lime. For hours on end I clean figures or reliefs, other hours are passed by drawing. Photographs have to be taken and I need to keep an eye on the workmen. Before I know it, the sun touches the treetops in the west, and the day is about to come to an end.

Now and then visitors arrive. Fortunately, this happens only rarely, as it takes so much time. A couple of foreigners—I get some news from the outside world and they explain everything about the ruins, how they were built etc., they are so well-informed—with their marvelous theories.

Or a group of half-breeds arrive from the village. All the men are mounted, the women and children trudge on behind them on foot, their babies sitting astride on their hips. They come here out of curiosity to see what the stranger is doing. It has caused a great deal of sensation that I have been excavating a few graves. They all ask for Los huesos, The bones. When they get to see them, they all stare in awe. “One doesn’t last more than 20 years in our cemetery”, they say when I explain to them that these bones are more than a thousand years old. The difference is that “one” will be wrapped in ground, placed with care in a crypt and thus many beautiful ornaments see the light of day.

The real Indians show up as well, and these are the best of them all. They appear from the forest without a sound, take a look around and don’t say much. Having prowled about for a couple of hours without talking, only looking, they thaw, speak now and then—most of them speak some Spanish and I know a little of their language. I always take very good care of these guys. They explain to each other what they see, and many of their small comments have provided me with interest-
ing leads.

A conversation is very slow; first I ask them how they are—answer: fine! Followed by an inquiry concerning my health. After having replied, fine thank you, we say nothing for a couple of minutes. Then I ask about the maize fields, the tobacco harvest and the hunting, and all of this is followed by brief answers and the proper intervals. Then I show them some kind of little Maya earthenware figurine and ask them if they ever find similar ones when working in their maize fields. To that question they always answer no and then we have a dram together. They don’t refuse that. The aguardiente always makes their tongues loosen up. Then we talk about the wind and weather and about the road to some place, and now and then I sneak in a question about ruins. It can be taken for granted that they do not know of any ruins close by, but always some that are situated a couple of days’ journey away. In this manner I often get information on new sites and I explore them further when I get there.

Little by little we become confident with each other, and suddenly they recall that they may have some small earthenware figurines in their huts and eventually also the fact that their hut is built in the middle of a ruin or very close to one. If you are impatient you’ll never get to know anything from these people. If, on the other hand, you take it easy and act in the way that they are used to get around each other they will become good friends. They will come again bringing small presents such as fruits, nicely woven baskets or the like. The poor creatures are badly plagued by fever and I give them quinine. They are shy, but completely honest, so much more reliable than the half-breeds who are haughty and call themselves “gente de razon” = “gens de raison”, in contrast to the Indians who are referred to as “gente de rafacha”. “Refaja” [sic] is the 2-3 meter long cloth the Indian women use as a skirt wrapped tightly around their hips.¹

Later

I sat down outside my hut for a little while. The moon hangs above the tower of the Palace and throws a fantastic light upon the buildings and the temples. The Otolum creek is roaring in the darkness below the trees and the cicadas are singing incessantly. Now and then the blowing of a cow horn can be heard down from the lowlands. It is my Indian friends who blow to scare away the jaguar. The forest is black against the starry sky. There the Pleiades, which had such tremendous importance to the religion and astronomy of the Maya, can be seen. This constellation was also very important to the Aztecs. They believed that it would be the end of the world when a period of 52 years had run out. Hence they sacrificed to the gods in the final days before such a 52-year period would elapse. All fires were put out, in the temples as well as in the homes, all earthenware jars were broken to pieces, for if the sun rose to a new period, then they would enter this new century (as one may call it) with new kitchen utensils. Everyone would sacrifice blood from their body by piercing their earlobes with maguey thorns. The blood was collected in straw and offered to the gods.

The evening before the last night the high priests went in a procession to a high mountain outside Mexico City. On the top of the mountain they waited in fear, fearing that the sun would not appear in the sky again. They followed the movement of the Pleiades, and as the constellation reached zenith, the new fire was lit. Runners stood ready with torches, they ran with the new fire to all towns and temples across the wide plain, and in the temples the people would fetch the fire for their hearths. The people was celebrating that the sun would continue its course through a new period. Isn’t it splendid? Can you imagine those thousands of people waiting in fear, everyone looking to the top of the mountain, seeing the first flames up there, creating light both there and in the hearts of the thousands that are waiting. Look at the runners who spread towards north and south, east and west. The torches resemble small luminous points in the night over the plain. The sun, the bringer of life, the bringer of light will continue its course. The sun and the rain, Tonatiuh and Tlaloc, were the great gods.

The North Star was followed by the Maya, and they were careful about Venus. The cycle of the moon they had calculated with only one day’s error in a period of 300 years compared to our modern calculations. By a simple system of numbers and signs their solar calendar covered a period of more than 374,000 years (three hundred and seventy-four thousand years) without messing up the numbers. What about our pitiful, tiny centuries!

¹Young Blom’s attempts at Spanish etymology do not seem quite convincing. “Refajo” is a heavy skirt, but the word could hardly be related to the expression “gente de rafacha”.

To be continued in the next PARI Journal.
Editor’s Note

As explained by the translators in their introduction to this series in PARI Journal 4(3), the Maya archaeologist and explorer Frans Blom carried out one of the first scientific investigations of Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, from December 14, 1922, to March 14, 1923. This issue continues the publication of his letters from the site.

January 30, 1923.

Last Sunday huge crowds of “ladinos”, the half-breeds, came to see the bones I exhumed from the burial chambers here. It appears to be the most sensational thing that has happened around here in the last 100 years. Revolutions are nothing when compared to these pieces of bone. 19 men, 32 women and countless children showed up. They all stood gaping in front of the objects in the small museum I have put up in my hut.

Having learnt from earlier experiences I had put up some large glass plates in front of the items in my collection. Curiosity is a woman’s virtue, and around here you see best with your fingers, so, to the great grief of the visitors it was “only look, don’t touch”. Afterwards I dragged them along on the big tour to the Palace, up into the Tower and down into the deep, humid and sinister subterranean corridors and rooms. Then I took them to the tallest pyramid and from there down into some burial chambers.

The village of Palenque has, after having been the neighbor of the ruins for 250 years, suddenly discovered them. Yes, to my “pleasure” I have been informed that even more people will show up next Sunday. I dread the thought of this since Sunday is usually my favourite day because I don’t have to keep an eye on my workmen. I walk around on my own with my tape measure and my drawing board. At my own leisure I can concentrate on the details of the ornaments and figures. However, my eyes often move away from the drawing board and look to the forest or across the plains of Tabasco below me. My thoughts make a journey to a distant past when this place was inhabited and alive. Then the buildings stand, as they were at that time, painted with a deep red color, figures and ornaments in pink, green, yellow, blue and black. “Halac uinik” [sic], meaning the true man, was the absolute ruler over the masses who toiled away to build temples to their gods. “Ahaucan mai,” the high-priest, lifts smoking copal to Itzamna, the great god, the god of the rising sun and life, god of science and astrono...
beehive, and then the population left the city, nobody knows why, and migrated to the Yucatan Peninsula. The forest claimed temples and palaces and hid them for hundreds of years. Only in the late 18th century were they rediscovered.

And now, hundreds of years later, I sit here among ruined mounds, all that has been left from a once mighty people. It is not strange that my thoughts drift back to what was once here.

Well, back to the present time and my Sunday visits. When they had become quite tired, they all gathered in my far from spacious hut, sat down all over the place, fingering everything they could get near. If you had not grown used to this kind of impudence you would lose your temper, and sometimes I nearly get mad at them. But I have now found a remedy to get rid of them. As soon as my food is brought in they disappear—to return when I have finished eating. But then—the door is closed. I either take a walk up to the ruins, or I lie down on my camp bed with a book. They continue to come sneaking to see if there should be a chance to get in. But no.

Around 2 p.m. the men ride back; towards the evening, when it gets cooler, the women slog away with the little ones sitting astride on their hips and those a little older clinging to their skirts. Once more everything is calm.

There is still plenty of work to be done here, at times despairingly much so. Every day something new is discovered during our work, and I hardly get time to do the most important tasks that had been scheduled.

For example yesterday; it was raining so we couldn’t work outdoors. I therefore began to clean up the interior of the Temple of the Sun; for a thousand years the floor had not been swept and you can probably imagine what it looked like. A couple of feet of earth and dirt covered the floor. But these kinds of layers are exactly what I like: a lot of things can be hid underneath them. We began the cleaning work, digging with trowels and brushing with brushes. And one wonderful thing after the other came to light. A large earthenware jar was found, with an excellently modeled face on one side. We found stone implements for stone carving, small votive figures in animal shapes made of clay—a fish was especially well made—a darning needle made of bone and many other strange things. The most wonderful thing, however, was probably the floor itself, made from lime mixed with very small and fine stones, its surface polished, shining like a parquet flooring, and painted in a deep red colour. The floor was swept and brushed and then surrounded by a fence made from an excellent palm covered by huge thorns on the trunk; it will keep intruders from trampling on the venerable floor.

Some days ago we discovered a burial chamber; I named it the tomb of the dentist, because either several persons have been buried in the chamber or otherwise is it a dentist who lies there surrounded by his entire collection of artificial teeth. I found small teeth, probably from women; the front teeth had been filed into a point—which was regarded a trait of beauty among the Maya—and large men’s teeth, the front teeth inlaid with small, black stones. Furthermore there were bad molars that had been filled. Even as dentists the Maya people knew a thing or two.

February 1, 1923.

This morning, one of the Indians who live nearby brought me the sensational announcement that he had discovered a huge cave with several rooms. This sounded promising, though I had my doubts as to the size of the cave and the number of rooms. The Indians are so superstitious and afraid of the dark and of ghosts that they do not venture on entering any cave.

So off we went, climbed down a couple of hillocks and up again, waded across a few streams and reached the “cave”. It turned out to be a minor burial chamber with a narrow side corridor which could be seen from outside. Hence his story about the many rooms. I measured the burial chamber, as is my custom; and since we were there, we examined it more closely. Another hole in the ground was found; another burial chamber filled with earth and debris. This too was measured, and when I climbed out of it, I noticed another hole between the stones in one wall of the chamber. A stick was put into it and disappeared. More burial chamber! I managed to loosen enough stones to get my head in and an arm with a light: Hola! Nice stuff in this chamber! A well-built room, and in one corner a table of stone slabs; a skeleton seemed to be lying on top. I retired my head and saw the Indians and my “boy” stare at me with open mouths and frightened eyes. They fear that I should order them to enter first into these hellish caves. I opened a hole large enough to squeeze oneself down. Armed with a light, a brush and a trowel, I disappeared into the hole. This was a lovely burial chamber, a real treat for an archaeologist. A well-built, vaulted room; along one side a low dais on which a skeleton lay outstretched.

Since the vault has been well walled up, there is only a little earth and dust over the skeleton; possibly two persons are buried here. Often one finds a well-built coffin made of limestone slabs, and on the stone lids, a second person has later been placed. As I didn’t have all the things necessary in order to take out the burial find, I let it be for the time being. I did, however, take out a round earring or rather ear-disk, carved out of mother-of-pearl, 9 cm [3.5 inches] in diameter; it lay loose upon the thin layer of earth covering the skeleton. On Saturday I will begin the work of taking out this grave, and I expect a lot from it.

Taking out such a grave is a laborious task. First you measure the burial chamber, then you go home and make
a plan of it. This plan is divided in squares measuring 20 cm [7.8 inches], and when the finds are to be taken up you first divide the burial chamber into squares equal to the squares on the plan. With brushes and trowel the find is cleared so that it lies in relief. Then every object is drawn onto the plan and numbered. As the objects are taken up, they are given the corresponding numbers and wrapped up. As soon as one layer is taken up, you brush on in order to examine whether there should be more further down. This is often the case, and for each new layer a new plan is made. For further safeguard, all loose dirt is carried up to two Indians sitting around a straw mat. Here they perform an operation they call “despulgar”, which in translation means something to the effect of exterminating the lice from your head, a favorite sport in this country.

I had taken a good look around and was about to crawl out when my “mozo” asked me whether he could come down; a courage unheard of, rewarded with a yes.

He came crawling, legs first and then the rear. But it took a while before the rest arrived; with half his body out in the open air and the other half hanging around the burial chamber he muttered a whole little series of prayers and incantations to all good saints to protect him during this daring venture. Thus protected he finally slid into the burial chamber, and when we crawled back up into the light of day it was obvious from the look of his compatriots that they considered him either a mad or a very brave man. As for myself, they don’t care that much about me anymore; they have realized that I am mad, a heathen, or that I have a quite unusually powerful saint.

When living among these peoples, you soon realize that their catholic religion is nothing more than a change of dress for their ancient gods. Some time ago, a man said to me: “The ancients had their saints too; the difference is just that theirs were made of stone and they were very ugly. Our saints at least look like human beings.” And you should see the collection they have here in the village church. Cheap dolls from a cheap bazaar were very ugly. Our saints at least look like human beings. — But I dare say I bounce off track.

The Maya had both man and animal gods, as well as composites of both. — Close to the burial chamber in question, we found a pyramid, a little temple in ruins and no fewer than eight subterranean chambers and corridors, some of the chambers quite impressive in size.

February 15, 1923.

Quite a crowd of ladies today! Around ten, Mrs. R. [Rateike] from Palenque village arrived with a few lady friends, a couple of them Mexican and one American. Plus a couple of Indian boys with picnic baskets, a whole little procession; they took up quite a bit of room in my little hut, sat on my camp bed and on benches and crates, tired from the hard ride on horseback.

I have somehow lost the habit of entertaining ladies, in Mexico [City] I don’t usually know what to say to them, but here it is easier, since they come to see the ruins and hear about them. After they had recovered their breath, we commenced our tour of the ruins. To come out here from Palenque and want to return on the same day is quite a tough job, since it is usually towards the hottest hours at noon that you have to trudge around and climb up and down the steep pyramids.

After half a hour, the sun was no longer so bad; furthermore I was quite gentle with them. Still, they looked more than tired enough when we were half way through, and the stony pyramid slopes did not help things.

The Mexican ladies, the daughters of a big landowner at Montecristo, wore little high-heeled shoes. But it got too difficult for them climbing down the pyramid of the Temple of the Law [i.e. the Temple of the Inscriptions]; they sat down, took off their shoes, and were better off in their stocking feet. Finally we had made it back, and they were all quite relieved when we sat down in my hut again.

Food came on the table, and this helped remedy their fatigue. It was quite strange to sit alone at a table with a swarm of ladies.

I was quite amused by the company. They had a good look around, and I wonder what they were thinking. Under the primitive circumstances, I’ve furnished my hut
as well as possible to my taste, and I actually find it quite cozy. The guests looked at the whole thing as people who visit a Negro village at an exhibition.

When they had once more rested a bit, looked at my books and peeped into my little museum, they left around 3:30 in the afternoon. An amusing little breath of air from the outside world.

February 19, 1923.

The rain is pouring down; this is what we would call real November weather back home in Denmark. Now and then the rain ceases, and banks of fog come drifting down along the mountain ravines, hiding temples and buildings.

Ordinarily the Otolum creek is a peaceable little idyllic mountain stream, but when the rain comes it swells into a furious river in a few moments, only to shrink just as quickly when the rain ceases.

The rain brings the cold; that is, cold compared to what I’m used to by now. Everything is clammy and damp. This tropical humidity is irritating; your books, your clothes and your footwear get moldy and musty, your mood gets sulky, and your weapons rust.

I should really be thankful for the rain and use the opportunity to work on my report; I have indeed spent the whole morning on it, but by now I’ve just had enough of it. Furthermore it is Sunday, and I try to talk myself into getting some rest. But resting, lying on your back and just staring quickly bores me. So I repaired my clothes and my boots for a while, but that too came to an end.

Dinner came on the table and was eaten, pheasant roasted the Indian way. After drawing the bird, they put a couple of well heated stones inside it, then it is rolled in clay with feathers and all, and then it is placed in the middle of the kitchen fire. When the crust is as hard as a clay pot, they break it off. The feathers come right off with the crust, and the meat is juicy and tender.

I stand on ceremony and always dine with a table cloth on the table. Likewise, I always change my clothes every afternoon at the end of the day’s work. Some—or even most people—might think this to be unnecessary when walking around all by yourself. I, however, feel quite some satisfaction every afternoon when kicking off my big, heavy boots, peeling the work clothes off my body and putting on a nice, clean change of clothes.

The rain brings out the snakes. It is quite amusing that the Maya worshipped the serpents and connected them with rain. They were keen observers of nature, as shown by their representation of animals and by their astronomy; and thus they probably thought serpents to be connected with rain as snakes were always to be seen in rainy weather.

I have made a new discovery: a frieze with a long inscription. I excavated it a couple of days ago and now toil at deciphering it. As only very few of the Maya hieroglyphs are known, I do this with quite some difficulty.

The howler monkeys do not like the rain. There is a family living in some trees close to the Palace, and as soon as the rain clouds gather they begin to howl and bark, they make an infernal concert. Well, I’m sure it can’t be all that funny to hang by the end of your tail in a mahogany tree and just get wet.

To be concluded in the next PARI Journal.
February 21, 1923.

It rained for three days, mostly a fine drizzle. Nonetheless, I rode a trip to the village on Monday. Almost all the families there were important people at the time when there was a kind of serfdom, about fifteen years ago. But those days are now over, and people who used to have twenty or thirty Indians as a kind of slaves now have to work themselves. They aren’t used to this, and consequently they just scrape through as best they can. They own rich lands which would with very little effort yield more than enough in order for them to live well. But work? No, thanks! I dismissed a man hired as an attendant here. He earned four pesos a day, which is a lot of money in these tracts. In return for that money he was supposed to live here at the ruins and supervise two workers hired to keep the vegetation from covering the ruins altogether. But this fine gentleman kept on living in the village and had not been out here for three months. So he was kicked out and couldn’t at all understand why. No sooner did the rumor spread in the village that there was a chance of earning four pesos a day without doing anything than I had a whole migration of people out here. They all told me how honest and hard-working they were, at the same time slighting the rest of the population. That they had to live here at the ruins they might accept, though they were much more willing to come out here a couple of times a week. I explained to each and every one of them that they were supposed to work as hard as the two workers; likewise that I would send a man out here once a month to inspect whether they did get any work done; and finally that they would not get their pay until his report had been received. Well, that they didn’t like. Then I insisted that they come out here for one trial week each. By now I have quite a reputation for advancing hard through the forests; the village Indians can hardly follow suit. Those who dared accept a trial week worked more during those days than in their whole previous life. Not one of them lasted for a full week. They suddenly got busy attending to their sick horse or wife and disappeared. So here I sit with a job at four pesos a day and no one to take it. The two workers here are real forest Indians, they are all right.

The village doesn’t really care for me, on the whole. The man I dismissed had not done a thing for two years. I sentenced him to either pay a fine of one month’s salary, or build me a palm house out here. He is now building the house. It is to be used as lodgings for travellers. Another chap who had been employed as a worker here and been paid, while at the same time attending to another job four days’ journey from here, was apprehended by me. He is now building me another house. This is for a museum.

A village “gentleman” used to be an inspector here some years back. He quietly carried off several very valuable stone tablets with inscriptions; they were to be sold secretly to Americans. I apprehended him too.
He was a wily old bird. He kept bringing me one insignificant artifact after the other. I knew that he had the tablets hidden somewhere and finally spotted a large tablet under a cupboard. I had by then become quite mad at him. Then I fetched the only policeman in town and four boys, and together we invaded the house. The boys pulled out the stone tablet, and sure enough it was a wonderful tablet covered with inscriptions. Then followed a little search of the house, and what we found were no mere trifles. I suggested that he take a trip to jail in order to ponder whether he might not have some more. That he didn’t like, and he produced a fine little mask carved in obsidian, a very hard volcanic glass. He had buried it under the dirt floor of his bedroom with all his savings. As he now had the money out I let him pay the workers, and let him off with that. Some nice robbers these fellows are. The same old chap has the reputation of having tormented and bullied his Indian serfs in the old days; furthermore he has six legitimate children and twenty-two illegitimate ones.

February 27, 1923.

No mail for me this week either, but there’s a reason for that. Some bandits boarded the river steamboat about a week ago, and they are said to have taken the mail with them ashore. It is known that they searched all the goods aboard, both those in crates and those in bottles, and that they extorted quite an amount of money from the passengers. Nothing is known for sure about the mail, but probably a few of my letters are now lying about somewhere in the forest. Darned annoying. I won’t know for sure, though, until the end of the week.

Today—Tuesday—we rode by automobile to Montecleristo, and that was where we heard about the bandits and the mail. On the way I saw a sight new to me: migrating swarms of locusts, the plague of the locusts. Only now do I understand what that means. Whole fields of maize had been eaten, all the trees were like beech trees in December, without a single leaf. Millions of locusts buzzing in the air. When we drove through the swarm, they lashed against our faces, and the bottom of the car was soon covered by locusts. Around four we were back in Palenque village, and soon I was heading back to my little Eden. Eden—yes, it is beautiful, hot and filled with serpents; the only thing missing is Eve and her kind—luckily so. This is why it is so nice and peaceful. My joy was doubled when I saw that my people had, in my absence, cleared the scrub and brushwood off a large piece of land that I particularly wanted cleared. They must have started early and worked till late during the two days I had been gone. It delighted me to see that I could go away without their profiting from my absence to idle, as is so often the case here.

February 28, 1923.

Another beautiful day. It is spring, i.e. the season of flowers. Oranges and lemons are in bloom and fill the air with their heavy scent. The wild begonias, which cause me no end of trouble as they cling to the buildings everywhere, are in full bloom. Large clusters of white and pink flowers nod from their long stems. The days are hot, but the shady forest is near; and as evening falls a cool breeze rises from the lowlands. When morning approaches it may even be quite cold. And what nights! Once more it is moonlight, and temples and palaces shine silvery white in the pale light against the dark forest. When I put out my lamp, everything in my hut is striped. The walls are made of sticks, and between them there is plenty of room for light and air.
Windows are unheard of in this kind of house, nor are they needed. You live so to speak in the open air.

March 5, 1923.

Have I told you about my little friend “Nando”, a little Indian boy with black hair and black eyes? His father works for me, his mother cooks for me, his elder sister does my laundry, and a brother and younger sister serve my food. The whole family live off me and do their best to make me comfortable, they are quite touching in their own way. Nando is four years old and is really named Hernan or Fernando, and he is the funniest and happiest little boy. At the beginning he was somewhat shy. His brother and sister collected small clay figurines and arrowheads for me. There are plenty of those lying about on the ground here, and each new downpour brings out more. Nando quickly learned the trick. At first he came rushing into my hut with his chubby little hand stretched out at me. “Take”, he said, emptied the contents of his hand into mine and hurried off with all possible speed. All sorts of small things, fine little round pebbles, snail shells, lumps of clay, everything that his little head thought I could use. By and by he became more confident, and now he walks in and out and makes himself at home. Babbling and chatting he walks around my little room while I work, he examines everything, and he is bright. He is tremendously amusing, and whenever he becomes too vivacious it is so wonderfully easy to send him back to his family.

His attire consists of as little as possible. On Sundays he is dressed in trousers with pockets, and then he calls himself a “señor”. One day he found a piece of string and suddenly appeared in my museum swinging his lasso. With the most sincere eyes he looked at me and explained that the rope—the piece of string had become one in his imagination—was good for catching bulls, and asked me whether I would sell him the rope. But the most amusing thing about him is that he sings, and sings well, in the purest little voice, quite in tune. He has heard his elder sister sing, and performs the whole repertory. One or two words from the songs are true enough, the rest he fills with funny sounds resembling the words he doesn’t know. He looks like a little angel painted by Murillo, and Nando and I are friends and converse very seriously and sensibly with each other.

Nando's elder sister is 17 and should by local standards have been married a year or two ago. She has a boyfriend, and she is nicely fat. Chubby and fat is all that counts around here. If you wish to flatter a man you tell him he looks fat. If you ask how such and such a person is doing, you receive the answer that he is “muy gordo”, very fat, meaning that he is wonderfully well. If two men talk about a woman you often hear them saying, “how pretty and how fat she is”.

Figure 3. Oliver La Farge, Frans Blom, and “Tata” Lazaro Hernandez. After Tribes and Temples Fig. 374.
My museum has now been completed. It is the common local style, “château de palm tree,” several inches between the planks of the walls, light and airy. And this morning I asked my men to make boards for the tables. This too takes place in a way that seems unusual to the outsider. First the Indians disappear for quite a while into the forest, and when they show up again they come proudly marching with three or four logs, each a foot wide or more. It looks formidable, but it is not the work of special strongmen. The timber they have sought out is as light as a feather and shiny white. They throw off their load, grab a log, place it upright, and with swift slashes they soon have the boards all done. They do not use axes but their machete, the long sabre-like knife that follows them everywhere, even to their balls and dances. And you should see those fellows slash. I would maintain that they can hold a pencil in their outstretched arm and sharpen it with their machete. It may sound like a lie, and it may be partly one, but it is definitely not one altogether.

There is not one iron nail in the whole museum building, and all the building material comes from the forest. Everything has been tied together with lianas and bast. The doors consist of two sticks on top and two at the bottom tied to the door posts, and in the space between them the door sticks are placed. Very simple. Here nature gives us everything. Even my wash stand comes from the forest. A young tree with three branches, placed close together, growing upwards and a little outwards. In the cleft between the branches is placed the clay vessel serving as washbowl. My bookcase is not quite that natural, but no less practical. Kerosene crates, one piled on top of the other, this is what is so fancily called a “section bookcase”. Besides being practical and cheap, these bookcases have one more advantage. The crates are usually soaked in kerosene, and this is not to the liking of the white ants—the ruin of all books.

You get frugal and clever as the years go by—and thrifty as well.

I suddenly happened to look at my clock, it has now been hanging on a nail for a month, resting. Well, what do you need a clock for? It is time to get up when the sun gets up. In the middle of the day, you get hungry—and again in the late afternoon. When the sun sets, it is probably evening, and then of course there is our rooster. It is a very fine rooster which crows on the stroke of nine and at midnight.

Of other zoological oddities we have here a hunting dog, of more than mixed breed, with a fine nose for armadillos and burial chambers. But since armadillos like to live in caves, I guess that the latter fact is closely connected to the first—though I would of course like to make people believe that I’ve trained the dog to find burial chambers.

Then there is a tame mouse which eats my soap every night—well, whether it is really tame or just unusually cheeky I don’t know. The latter, I guess. And close to a million ants eat my sugar. Moreover, I feed the mosquitoes and other insects. They feed off me, though their chances have now been considerably diminished, since I have grown a beard over my whole face.

Fair is beholding the sight of the beard, Red and ruffled and warm. Hairy and hardy, the head of the hero Has met the mosquitoes’ murderous swarm, Hung now hangs the harrowing horde, Hooked in the beard in the wood. Dying now drop the damaging devils, Gone while the going was good. Moral: leave your stubbles to grow in the jungle!  
Ancient Norse Skaldic Poem?

Well, after this poetic outburst I guess I had better stop for tonight.

March 10, 1923.

I have already little by little begun packing my stuff, in order to have it all ready for the day of departure. My clothes have been reduced to rags, my boots have no soles, I’ve read all the books I’d brought and I’ve barely any more paper to write on, so it is high time I should leave. If only the aforementioned matters were in order, I would love to stay on for another three months. Well, the mailman is at my door, so this is all you’ll get.

March 19, 1923.

This will be my last letter here from the ruins. In a couple of hours my pack animals will be loaded, and tonight I will ride the 60 km [37 miles] to Montecristo. But before I leave I will make another round through the beautiful ruins where I have now spent three months with studies and joy. At the beginning of April I will probably reach Mexico [City], and I will stay there, as far as I know, until October.

Now my workers come to get the crate I am sitting on to load it onto the mules. I am anxious about my eight crates, and wish that I had safely arrived in Mexico [City]. All my finds have been wrapped, and I am afraid something should break on the way.

The sun shines over the forest and the ruins, a joyful period of my life draws to its end. I repeat the final words of the prologue to Tiefland [“The Lowlands”]: “Wir gehen ins Tiefland herunter, da streiten sich die Menschen.” [“We descend into the lowlands, where humans quarrel.”]