

## SYLVANUS GRISWOLD MORLEY, 1883–1948

By J. ERIC S. THOMPSON

WITH the death, on September 2, 1948, in Santa Fe, of Sylvanus G. Morley, Maya research loses one of its great men and its most colorful figure. Morley, or Vay as he was called from the Cosmos Club, Washington, to the American Club, Guatemala City, was born in Chester, Pa., June 7, 1883, the eldest of six children of Colonel B. F. Morley, then professor of chemistry at Pennsylvania Military College. His maternal grandfather, a Belgian, had been professor of languages at the same college.

When Sylvanus was ten the family moved to Buena Vista, Colorado, and it was there and at Colorado Springs that he had his early education. From the time he went to Colorado he developed a deep interest in archaeology, although it was Egypt that drew him. In those days opportunities for earning a living in that profession were scant; Vay's father, realizing this, did not encourage the boy's ambition. However, those that knew Vay are well aware that if he had some objective, sooner or later he attained it whatever the difficulties and opposition he had to overcome; he was not discouraged from his determination to be an archaeologist.

He graduated from Pennsylvania Military College in 1904 with the degree of civil engineering. Thence he proceeded to Harvard, where, on Putnam's advice he shifted to the Maya field. Harvard awarded him a Fellowship in American Research, and, in 1908, his master of arts.

Morley made his first trip to Yucatan in January, 1907, visiting Acanceh, Ixmal, Xtocche, Tabi, Labna, Kabah, Zayil, Kiuic, Mayapan, and Chichen Itza, and thence to Mitla and Monte Alban. It was a good bag for a novice in those days of difficult transportation. Subsequent field trips in the Southwest<sup>1</sup> stimulated his interest in archaeology, but did not deflect him from his chosen career in Maya hieroglyphic writing.

He returned to Yucatan in 1909, working on a fellowship of the American Institute of Archaeology at Chichen Itza and Uxmal. Thence he moved to Kabah, where he came down with a severe attack of malaria. An old Maya and his wife tended him in his quarters in the inner central room of the Palace, and



<sup>1</sup> See also Kidder, A. V., *Sylvanus Griswold Morley, 1948*, (El Palacio, Santa Fe, N.M.), for a fascinating account of these.

pulled him through. This was the first of forty consecutive seasons in the Maya area, not a few of which brought serious fever, and all of which meant varying degrees of discomfort. The following three years saw Morley at Quirigua with the School of American Archaeology. In 1914 he and Spinden made an expedition of nearly four months in the Peten and down the Usumacinta.

In 1915 Morley started his long career of exploration and field work with Carnegie Institution of Washington. In the arduous decade that followed he traversed some of the most inaccessible parts of the Maya area, jogging, hour after hour, day after day, along those monotonous trails of the sullen forest, camping under miserable conditions each night, sweaty, unwashed, tick-bitten and flea-ridden. There was, too, the virtual certainty that something would go wrong: mules would get loose; the shelter, long abandoned by some chiclero, would collapse; the mosquito net would get torn; or, most likely of all, rain would drench one's bedding. Rice would be burned or afloat in lard, and the muddy dregs of a water-hole would be drunk tepid because they took too long to cool after the prophylactic boiling.

Morley hated every minute of it, but he kept on because it was only by so doing that he could "bring home the epigraphic bacon," as he used to say. He was fond of quoting, with emphatic endorsement, the remark of an old-timer in Belize: "Anyone who says he likes the bush is either a bloody fool or a bloody liar." I can see Morley now squatting before a stela to draw the glyphs, often with handkerchiefs around each wrist to keep the sweat from running down his arms on the paper, and, nearby, a rule which served to scale the glyphs and drive off mosquitoes. It was a hard life and not without danger.

In 1916 Vay almost lost his life when his party, returning from his great discovery of Uaxactun with its earliest known dates, was mistaken for a party of revolutionaries and ambushed by a detachment of Guatemalan troops. The doctor and the guide, who were at the head of the party, were killed. Morley owed his life to the fact that a few minutes before a liana had caught and ripped off his glasses; by dismounting to pick them up he lost his position at the head of the column, and was still in the rear when the action began. Many a time Morley has described those events to me: the sudden volley of rifles, the helter-skelter diving into the sea of forest on each side of the narrow trail, and the hours that he lay hidden in a clump of thick vegetation, afraid that a movement would bring a fresh volley of shots. That must have been the only time that Vay ever felt the forest was friendly. Then the night journey to safety on the British Honduras side of the boundary had to be undertaken. On another occasion, when relations between U.S.A. and Mexico were at their worst, an inebriated Mexican general, with a revolver in each hand, was dissuaded with difficulty from shooting Morley and his party who had taken insecure refuge under tables and behind lampposts.

Later, with the program of excavations in Yucatan, came greater comfort and security, but a report of new inscriptions was enough to lure Vay from the fleshpots of Chichen Itza forth again on "the hurricane deck of a mule" into unknown parts and known hardships.

The fruits are in those classics *The Inscriptions at Copan* and *The Inscriptions of Peten*. The former, the first publication to discuss in detail all the texts of a single site, won for Morley a title of which he was exceedingly proud, that of honorary citizen of Copan, as well as an honorary doctorate from Pennsylvania Military College; the latter earned him the Guatemalan order of the Quetzal and the Loubat prize. A very important paper, well exemplifying his thirst for complete data, is *The Supplementary Series in the Maya Inscriptions*, in which he brought together drawings of all lunar glyphs, for the details of many of which he had made long weary journeys. Working with this material, so painstakingly compiled and so lucidly presented, Teeple was able a few years later to solve the riddle of the lunar count; without this paper, the problem would probably still be unsolved. *An Introduction to the Study of the Maya Hieroglyphs*, with its clear exposition, its orderly arrangement, and its well-chosen illustrations, is a model of what textbooks should be.

Vay had a remarkable ability for getting a reading from the most weathered stela, and his tally of decipherments is formidable. He would return time and again to a doubtful glyph to get a different light, to run his fingers over eroded parts, or to check once more with rule. Because of field trips and lecture tours he had less time for the decipherment of unknown glyphs; his was rather the task of amassing data. Nevertheless, he proved the meanings of the so-called hotun and lahuntun glyphs, deciphered the winged Cauac glyph with its variants, and identified sundry variants of known glyphs. He did much to form opinion on problems of Maya history and epigraphy. His thesis, amply proved, that almost every Maya monument was erected to mark the close of a katun or one of its quarters is an example of that type of contribution; there are many in his general writings. One seldom realizes how many of our current ideas stem from him.

Maya archaeology is immensely indebted to Morley; had it not been for him Carnegie Institution of Washington would not have entered the Maya field. The Institution, contemplating work in some branch of the study of man, invited W. H. R. Rivers, A. E. Jenks and Morley to submit projects. Rivers' plan called for ethnological work in Melanesia; Jenks' for research in physical anthropology; Morley's for excavation at Chichen Itza. Regarded dispassionately, Rivers' program was far superior to Morley's. The rapid deculturization of Melanesia meant that irreplaceable data would be lost unless opportunity were seized; Maya ruins could safely be left for the time being. Yet Morley's contagious enthusiasm won the day; research in the Maya field was expanded

to an unprecedented degree, and later, at Kidder's instigation, was to spread to many related fields, and, largely as a result of Morley's advocacy, other institutions entered the field.

In another way Maya archaeology owes much to Morley. He had a burning desire to "sell the public on the Maya," and in that he was extremely successful. In his lectures delivered from one end of the country to the other he could take some rather dull piece of excavation, and with his magic personality lead his hearers to feel themselves participants in a glorious and momentous undertaking; he had the William Jennings Bryan touch.

Morley's interests were wide. He was deeply attracted by American politics and had a more than passing acquaintance with world affairs. He was an ardent admirer of the colonial art of Meso-America, especially its ecclesiastical branch; the fine collection which he and Mrs. Morley presented to the Museum of New Mexico bears witness to his discernment. Few persons can have equalled him in his immense fund of stories or his ability to tell them. He was a great mixer, at home with all classes and all races. He spent a part of each year in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where the traditions and speech of much of the population made him feel at home, but, more important, where the semiaridity, the great distances, and clean air supplied relief from the claustrophobic forest, the humidity, and the insects of the Maya lowlands.

In 1947 Morley was appointed director of the Museum of New Mexico, and he had planned to assume full control on his retirement from Carnegie Institution at the end of 1948. Shortly before his death Vay left the desert of agnosticism, in which he had wandered for many years, and was received into the Roman Catholic church. Heart attacks in the past two years had given warning, but Vay was an incorrigible optimist; the very day before his death he was discussing plans for future work. That he lived to 65 is in large measure due to the care of Frances Morley, who kept watch on his diet and general health with an affectionate and stern eye; she had need to do so, for Vay, like a small boy, would sneak a helping of his beloved kidneys and bacon or some other favorite dish on the medical *verboden* list if Frances' attention was distracted for only a moment.

Kidder remarked that Vay's first action on the other side would be to find Kukulcan and give him an *abrazo*. I picture, not irreverently, Sylvanus cross-examining St. Peter on the *jornadas* to reach Kukulcan's abode, and getting full data on the water holes en route. Then would come the checking of information with sundry cherubim. One hopes the informants agreed; it would have been the first time in Vay's long career.

If you desire a tangible monument to Vay, wander around the excavated buildings of Chichen Itza or view the rich collections from Uaxactun in the museum in Guatemala; if you seek something more evocative of his rich per-

sonality, it lies in the hearts of his countless friends, be they U.S. senators, archaeological colleagues, or humble chicleros.

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<sup>1</sup> Full bibliography in Roys, R. L., and M. W. Harrison, Sylvanus Griswold Morley, 1883-1948, *American Antiquity*, 14, pp. 215-221. Menasha, 1949.