

SIR ERIC THOMPSON, 1898-1975



SIR ERIC THOMPSON, doyen of Maya scholars, died on September 9th, 1975, at Cambridge, England, at the age of 76. During a working life of half a century he made major contributions to Maya studies in the fields of epigraphy, ethnohistory, and field archaeology, and at his 76th birthday was honored by Her Majesty the Queen with the degree of Knighthood, the first New World archaeologist to receive such distinction.

John Eric Sidney Thompson was born on New Year's Eve of 1898, the younger son of George Thompson, F.R.C.S., a successful doctor. He grew up in the family home at 80 Harley Street, London, then as now the base of many fashionable medical men, and was sent to school at Winchester College in 1912. When the First World War broke out he lied about his age to join the army (under the assumed name of Neil Winslow), and photographs of 1915 show him in the kilt and glengarry of the London Scottish, with which were worn a military tunic and gaiters. In 1916 he was wounded and repatriated to first a hospital in Huddersfield and then convalescence in Seaford, and ended

the war as an officer in the Coldstream Guards. He then went out to Argentina, where a branch of the family ranched cattle at Arenaza, west of Buenos Aires, and worked as a *gaucho*; pictures of him at this period show the beret and cigarette which remained principal identifying modes of his appearance for the rest of his life.

He visited England again in the early 1920s and as a result his first published article, "A Cowboy's Experience: Cattle Branding in the Argentine," appeared in the Southwark *Diocesan Gazette*. The editorial preamble noted, "Mr. Thompson is a cowboy reader of the Gazette. Last year he came to England, made a tour of the Cathedrals, visited the Opera at Covent Garden, made friends with men in religious and political circles and valued the opportunities of reading the best books. On returning to the Argentine he found that the life which he had regarded as free and spacious was in reality narrowing . . . he is now on his way to England asking himself whether he shall become a student at Guy's or go to the School of Economics to prepare for a political career."

Eric Thompson did neither, but went to Cambridge University as a member of the then non-collegiate Fitzwilliam House (now Fitzwilliam College) to read for the certificate in anthropology under A. C. Haddon in 1925-26. A friend and contemporary there, at St. John's College, was Jorge R. Acosta, until his death in early 1976 head of the prehispanic monuments division of INAH in Mexico City, who said: "We both enjoyed Cambridge: Eric worked and I played tennis." Thompson was in fact teaching himself Maya hieroglyphics, and in 1925 he wrote to Sylvanus G. Morley, head of the Carnegie Institution project at Chichén Itzá, and asked for a job in Maya archaeology. In his autobiography *Maya Archaeologist* (1963), the existence and charm of which render any second-hand detailed account superfluous, he describes how Oliver

Ricketson interviewed him on Morley's behalf in London, and how the success of his application was assured by generous libations of his father's pre-war burgundy.

In January 1926 Eric Thompson arrived for the first time in Yucatán, and began work at Chichén Itzá under Morley on the task of reconstructing the external friezes of the Temple of the Warriors: "It was a sort of giant jigsaw puzzle made worse by the fact that the stones had been carved before being placed in position . . . I labored for weeks in the incandescent sun of Yucatán fitting the stones together, moving them sometimes nearly forty yards to see if I could make a fit . . . in my memory it seems that I personally shifted every blessed stone." He was then put in charge of the excavations of the Caracol, a building he disliked, and in that season also founded, with George Vaillant, the other member, "the Young Men's Maya Association to debunk the views of our elders and betters" (1963:40).

Thomas Gann, the Anglo-Irish doctor and amateur archaeologist who worked in British Honduras, visited Chichén in 1926 and described his 'discovery' of the ruins of Cobá (in fact explored by Maler in 1893), and Thompson was sent with A. V. Kidder to reconnoitre the site. He returned two months later to follow up a report of "stone men", which proved to be the eight Classic stelae in the Macanxoc group; Morley could not believe Thompson's reading of the dates, so a third trip was made and Morley was persuaded.

At the end of the season at Chichén Itzá Eric Thompson became Assistant Curator at the Chicago Natural History Museum, a post which he held until he joined the Carnegie Institution in 1935. In 1927 he produced the first edition of the Museum booklet *The Civilisation of the Mayas*, which in revised form still sells in 1976; and also his correlation of the Maya and Christian calendars.

In 1927 also Thompson was seconded to the British Museum Expedition to British Honduras, led by Thomas A. Joyce and working at the site of Lubaantun in the south of the Colony. The site had been discovered by Gann in 1903, and "discovered" again with great *éclat* by Gann and Mitchell-Hedges in 1924. Their work had aroused Joyce's interest and in 1926 he had carried out an initial season at the site, describing megalithic architecture which he compared with Peruvian sites and thought early, and a local style he dubbed "in-and-out" from its overhanging upper courses. Within a few weeks Thompson first disagreed with, then by excavation disproved Joyce's conclusions: megalithic masonry was not the earliest at the site, and was merely a variant on the common "stepped perpendicular" style but using larger blocks to build massive retaining terraces on the hillside; and "in-and-out" was again a variant of the common style, caused by root action pushing out the upper course of masonry in each tier. Joyce did not accept Thompson's conclusions, and their disagreements were acerbic, but nevertheless published Thompson's report with his own disagreement noted; as a result Thompson remained loyal to Joyce, and his memory, thereafter.

Toward the end of that season the ruins of Pusilha were discovered some twenty miles to the southwest, and Thompson was sent to investigate. The site proved to have more than 20 stelae, the earliest of 9.7.0.0.0, A.D. 593, some of which he reported in a 1928 paper in *Man*, and the massive abutments of a stone bridge across the Moho River. On this journey Thompson had been accompanied by Faustino Bol, a Mopan Maya from the village of San Antonio in southern Belize, and their long talks together had shown Thompson that "these modern descendants of the ancient Maya still preserved many ancient customs and religious ideas . . . it was clear that archaeological excavations were not the only means of learning about the ancient ways . . . pick and shovel would never reveal the many customs that had survived in San Antonio from an earlier age." The result of his sojourn there was his first monograph, *Ethnology of the Mayas of Southern and Central British Honduras*, (1930) which also contained much material garnered from his Socotz workmen during the 1929 excavations at Tzimin Kax and Camp 6 in the southern Cayo District of the colony, which were also published by the Field Museum as a second monograph in 1931.

In the same year Thompson joined forces with Gann to publish *The History of the Maya from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, in which he uncharacteristically deferred to the use of the Spinden (12.9.0.0.0.) correlation which Gann accepted instead of Thompson's own, and now

almost universally adopted, version. 1931 also saw the first season of excavations at San Jose, the last project Thompson carried out for the Field Museum, and one explicitly designed to investigate a small and perhaps "average" Maya ceremonial center (a term coined by Thompson to replace the slightly misleading "city"). The report on the several seasons' work there was published in 1939 by the Carnegie Institution, and was notable for a long appendix by Anna O. Shepard on the temporal changes in tempering material used in the ceramics at the site, one of the first applications of what is now called "archaeological science."

In 1936, his first year with Carnegie Institution's Division of Historical Research (where he remained employed until his retirement and the division's abolition in 1958) Thompson worked at Rio Bec, discovering two new groups of ruins, and at El Palmar, where he recorded 44 stelae and some of the finest "eccentric flints" ever found. In 1938 he returned to British Honduras to work at Benque Viejo, establishing a ceramic sequence for the Belize Valley that stood until Willey's work at Barton Ramie after the Second World War.

Thompson's interest in Maya ethnography had extended itself back in time to embrace ethnohistory, and a 1938 paper in the *American Anthropologist* on sixteenth and seventeenth century reports of the Chol Maya was only the first installment of a distinguished contribution to this aspect of Maya studies, which included his 1966 Huxley Lecture on the colonial occupation of the allegedly abandoned Central Area of the lowlands, and which became increasingly an integral part of his writings.

During the 1940s the major topic which occupied him was the attempt to understand the structure of and decipher the non-calendric hieroglyphs: of the nine papers which he published in 1943 four were on epigraphy. This work culminated in 1950 in the Carnegie monograph *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: Introduction*, a modest title for a work which has remained unsurpassed for a quarter of a century. Epigraphic work remained his most important activity, although he was again modest enough about his contribution to have his *Preliminary Decipherments of Maya Glyphs* printed at his own expense in England after his retirement. His second major publication in this field was *A Catalog of Maya Hieroglyphs* (1962), and a third, in 1971, *A Commentary on the Dresden Codex* was his last substantial work. Over this same period, however, he also produced *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilisation* (1954), a delightfully idiosyncratic and entertaining piece of scholarship, *Thomas Gage's Travels in the New World* (1958), the wanderings of a seventeenth century English Dominican monk, his own picaresque and piquant autobiography in 1963, and in 1970 the collection of papers on *Maya History and Religion* with its fundamental study of the great god Itzam Na.

Thompson officially retired in 1958, and returned to England, where he settled at Ashdon in Essex, within easy reach of the libraries of Cambridge and London, at a house named "Harvard" after the Massachusetts village where he and his wife Florence had lived for many years; his last field season had been just before his retirement, when with his son he had taken part in the Carnegie Institution's Maya swansong at Mayapan. With retirement came honors: the University of Yucatan made him an LL.D. in 1959, the University of Pennsylvania an L.H.D. in 1962, and he added the Drexel Medal in 1962 to the Rivers Memorial Medal (1945) and the Viking Fund Medal in Archaeology (1955). Although he was made a Fellow of the British Academy shortly after his return to England this recognition by his intellectual peers was not matched by either public or academic honor for more than a decade in his own country. Spain conferred on him the Order of Isabel la Católica in 1964, the year that the International Congress of Americanists met in Seville (Thompson had been its President at Cambridge in 1952 and was thereafter a member of the Permanent Committee), Mexico the Order of the Aztec Eagle in 1965.

Mexico again honored him with the Sahagún Prize in 1971, Tulane University with an LL.D. in 1972, and finally in 1973 his old College at Cambridge, Fitzwilliam, made him an Honorary Fellow and the University of Cambridge Litt.D *honoris causa*, the Aztec Eagle being elegantly latinised in the citation as *aquila mexicana*. Public recognition of his immense contribution to Maya archaeology, epigraphy, and ethnohistory came in 1975, when Her Majesty the Queen conferred on Eric Thompson a Knighthood of the Order of the British Empire in the New Year's list published

the morning after his 76th birthday. A few weeks later, at the invitation of the Governor of Yucatan, Sir Eric Thompson guided the Queen around Uxmal during her State Visit to Mexico; the formal banquet in the courtyard of the Monjas was entertained by an invocation to the Chacs, the Maya rain gods, who promptly responded, in the middle of the dry season, with a downpour. Eric Thompson, who had always burned copal incense before beginning an excavation, was not surprised.

During this, his last visit to the Maya lands he loved, he visited the new excavations at Cobá, where he had spent his honeymoon nearly half a century earlier, and in Guatemala City received the Order of the Quetzal. Only a few weeks after returning to England he was travelling again, to Peru and Bolivia, but fell ill on his return and died at the end of the summer, as the maize harvest was being gathered in Yucatan. He lies buried beside the ancient church at Ashdon in Essex, where he served faithfully for many years.

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