

Breaking the Maya Code

1 x 60 or 1 x 90



International

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The complex and beautiful Maya hieroglyphic script was, until recently, the world's last major undeciphered writing system. Its decipherment has been, and continues to be, one of the twentieth century's great intellectual adventures.

Breaking the Maya Code tells story of the Maya decipherment from the 16th century to the present. The program is based on the book of the same title by Dr. Michael D. Coe, referred to by the *New York Times* as "one of the great stories of twentieth century scientific discovery." When Cortez first landed in 1519 at Cozumel, the local Maya fled into the jungle. In their deserted village, the invading Spanish found innumerable books written in hieroglyphic symbols. The Maya culture that produced these books had been literate for almost two millenia. The invading Spanish outlawed the script and burned thousands of books, severing the Maya people from the record of their past. In the nineteenth century, however, the texts began to re-emerge as buried cities and fantastic inscriptions were discovered in the Central American jungle. Early scholars decoded the complex Maya calendar and identified glyphs for gods, planets, animals, colors and directions. But misconceptions about the nature of the Maya people and their script kept the meaning of the texts a mystery for over a century more.

Over the past few decades, an extraordinary and diverse group of epigraphers and historians, ethnographers and archaeologists, astronomers and linguists, artists and amateurs, have finally unlocked the secrets of the Maya script. For the six million modern Maya, this recovered history and literature is an extraordinary source of pride and identity; Maya children are now learning to read basic hieroglyphs in school, and parents who for centuries named their babies after Christian saints are now naming them after ancient Maya kings.

But the decipherment is also opening up an invaluable treasure for the rest of us. The Maya hieroglyphic texts constitute a two thousand year written record unique in the Western Hemisphere. The Maya rose in complete isolation from the web of influence that pervaded the civilizations of Europe and Asia. Their texts, which reveal a world of both uncanny familiarity and profound difference, have much to teach us about what it means to be human.

Breaking the Maya Code tells the mystery of the Maya code as it is solved. Due to the efforts of an extraordinary and diverse group of scholars, 80% of the Maya texts can now be read. The decipherment is both transforming our vision of the ancient Maya and enabling the eight million modern Maya to begin, once again, to take possession of their own history.

CREDITS

Producer/Director and Producer: David Lebrun
Associate Producer: Rosey Guthrie

A production of Night Fire Films.

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