

## An Interview with Dr. Peter Mathews



*Dr. Peter Mathews is a professor of Archaeology and Maya Hieroglyphics at La Trobe University in Victoria, Australia. He was an instrumental part of the First Palenque Round Table in 1973, during which the Maya code of hieroglyphics was finally unlocked. He was also awarded a MacArthur Prize Fellowship in 1984, and in 2002 was elected a Fellow of the Academy of the Humanities in Australia. Peter has been an inspiration to the Maya Exploration*

*Center for many years now and we're proud to include him in our growing list of interviewees. This interview, conducted by MEC's Director Ed Barnhart, took place at the Hotel Mission in Palenque, just after Merle Green Robertson's birthday celebration.*

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EB: When and where were you born?

PM: I was born in Canberra, Australia – you guys say Canbérria – in 1951. It was a very small town in those days, because Canberra was just being built up as the federal capitol, and I was one of very few people born there in those years. My father worked at the national university. He was an economist, but he also had a job recruiting staff for the new, growing university – in the days when universities grew rather than declined. And so I spent my first three years in England. But my first real memories were as a kid growing up in Adelaide, on the south coast of Australia, in the center of the wine industry. I had a great childhood. When I was 14, we were living in Los Angeles, I was a senior at Santa Monica high school and about to go on to UCLA. After great adventures living in England and the States, we moved back to Canberra. Then I had to spend three more years in high school, because of the different standards.

EB: So you've been an international person since the beginning. How did you first get involved in Maya studies?

PM: The summer before we moved back to Australia, Dad had to go to a conference in Miami, and so we drove across the States from L.A. to Miami, and then we drove from Miami around the Gulf and down as far as Mexico City. I wanted to look at all the archaeological sites. Even then I was interested in archaeology as a career. We drove back to L.A., up through the Rockies to Prince Rupert Island, took the ferry to Alaska, and then drove all the way back down the coast. Who knows how many miles Dad drove, but it was one of those trips of a lifetime, and the Mexico part was one of the highlights.

Later, when I went to the University of Calgary for my undergraduate degree, I had the opportunity to study with Dave Kelley. Dave was my guide and mentor, who taught me everything he knew about Maya hieroglyphs. My real lucky break came

when Dave and Merle Greene Robertson colluded with each other, after a fashion. Dave was on sabbatical in England at the time Merle was organizing the first Mesa Redonda, in 1973, and he wrote to her and said, "Well, I can't come from so far away but I've got a student who's been working on Palenque." So I got this letter out of the blue inviting me to Palenque. It was a huge surprise.

EB: I believe you were the youngest scholar there. Was that a challenge? Was that intimidating?

PM: I wouldn't say I was a scholar at that stage.

EB: The tale I heard is that you were by far the most organized, that you showed up with a briefcase...

PM: I showed up with a *suitcase* full of blue folders of all the stuff Dave and I were working on. Dave decided to concentrate on Thompson's catalogue of Maya hieroglyphs, and I basically looked through it all, did my own translations of Thompson's, and then showed them to Dave. That was the methodology in those days. We could read so few of the glyphs then. When my translations differed from Thompson's, Dave and I would talk about it, and of course Dave would say, "No you're all wrong, can't you see that little squiggle up there?" And occasionally he'd make my day by saying, "You're right and Thompson's wrong."

What I got out of that was a very good visual sense of the glyphs. I couldn't read them but I could recognize them. I do think that if you don't have a good visual memory you're lost. Today, when epigraphers get together and talk, they say *pa ta wa ni* or whatever. They have the inscriptions in their heads. When Linda Schele and I talked, we used Thompson's categories - T this or T that. I was positively stuck on Thompson's categories. Linda thought I was positively anal on that. By the third semester I got the prize for being Mr. T number. In those days I could draw T781 or whatever. I remembered them all then. Now I can't.

EB: Your mentor, David Kelley, is a very colorful character. Could you share one of your favorite stories about him?

PM: Where do I start! Maybe the first meeting. The one thing I regret is that I spent my entire first undergraduate year not in contact with Dave. In the Australian system the professors are so far above you, you can't even talk to them for the first few years. But there was one young professor at Calgary who said, "If you're interested in Maya studies, you should talk to Dave Kelley." So I frantically screwed up my courage and thought of an excuse. Dave was going to teach a class for third year students, and I knocked on the door and said, "Hi, I'm interested in the Maya," and Dave placed his hand on his forehead and said, "Well, you've got to come home for supper tonight." This was absolutely so foreign to me I felt like an anthropologist with massive culture shock. When I got to the house, two or three graduate students were there, Dave's wife, Jane, was wonderful, and I remember thinking, in a fleeting moment of paranoia, that they were setting me up for a grilling. Dave and I chatted and chatted until four in the morning. And that's pretty much how we spent the next

year. We were both night owls. Dave and Jane eventually became second parents to me.

People like Dave and Jane, Floyd Lounsbury and Mike Coe when I got to Yale, shared their lives and their knowledge. I like to think people in universities can still do that. Of course, that was in the days when classes were smaller and you could talk to individual students in a way you can't today. I would have almost thought I owed a debt, except that I think it's the natural way one should behave as a teacher. They treated us as colleagues rather than students. This made a huge impression on Linda Schele, because she hadn't studied anthropology and didn't have a doctorate yet. She didn't need to feel out of place but she did. She was always made welcome, and that's the way it should be. I went through it, too. I thought, "My God, Dave is one of the great scholars and he is spending so much time with me." It was heaven.

EB: You went on to teach for a number of years at the University of Calgary, with many adventures in Mexico in between, and recently you made a big move back to Australia. How are your programs going?

PM: Pretty good. I always thought if I had the opportunity I would go back and set up a Maya studies program there. Half of my graduate students are Mexican and half are Australian, with a few Americans thrown in. I have really good undergraduate students. I get to watch my favorite football team. The life style is wonderful in Australia. I'm not freezing my butt up in Calgary. I miss my friends there, of course. I don't miss the cold.

EB: What is your major research focus now?

PM: Well, I'm working on a series of data bases. We've now reached the point in glyphic decipherment that we can read the majority of the texts fairly securely. There are all sorts of problems we can tack on, both linguistic and grammatical, but we have enough of a solid basis that I think we can get a start on other things. There are three projects that I'm working on. One is an evolving dictionary of Maya glyphs, which is co-authored by one of my graduate students, Péter Buró, and is available on the FAMSI website. The other is a Maya "who's who," which gives the names, dates, achievements, and exploits of various Classic Maya elites – everything we can say about these dignitaries for posterity. Third is the Maya dates project, which is the first thing I did when I came to Palenque, taking all the dates and putting them in a chronological framework. I'm having fun but it will take a long time.

EB: Early in your career as an archaeologist and epigrapher you developed a great fondness for pigs. How did your passion begin?

PM: I'm not sure where this myth started. I think it began here in Palenque with a very famous peccary named Petunia that belonged to Moises Morales. Petunia and I just loved each other. I was staying at Merle's house. Petunia would come at dawn and go rat-a-tat on the screen door with her snout. I would get up and open the door and she'd trot in and roll on her back, and I would rub her chin and her tummy until she was satisfied. She loved me for that. Then she'd get up and go about her morning rounds. We got on famously. Sure enough, friends started giving me gifts of pigs,

including live performing pigs that bobbed for apples. By the good offices of Linda Schele, it went from strength to strength.

EB: One question that we ask everybody: Where do you think K'an Bahlam is buried?

I was the first one to argue for the Temple of the Cross, on the basis of the inscriptions. We're all familiar with Waldeck's early drawing of springs pouring out of the underlying hill, and we now know there's a bed of soft, chalky limestone underneath the platform. After all the geological work that's been done, I guess I'm forced to accept that I was wrong. It doesn't look as if he's there or that there's anything like a major tomb. I don't know about the Temple of the Foliated Cross. The same geological survey was done there at about the same time. The Foliated Cross is built into a sacred mountain, like the Temple of the Inscriptions, and they could have cut into the living rock along the same axis. Beyond that, I'm not sure there's a rationale for any of the other places at Palenque.

EB: What is your favorite piece of Maya art?

PM: Gee, that is difficult. It's like asking what is your favorite site. It's got to be Palenque, but then you feel guilty when you think of all the other sites. In terms of old favorites, I think it's got to be the Tablet of the 96 glyphs at Palenque, because of the exquisite calligraphy and the subtle content. Of course, they're finding new and fancier monuments at the site. You probably can't have just one favorite. You've got to have a list of a hundred!