


MICHAEL D. COE (1929–2019): A LIFE IN THE PAST

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INTRODUCTION

Michael D. Coe lived a remarkable life, born into privilege but always a “man of the people.” Committed to novel and transformative scholarship, he shared knowledge with students and the public, explored new methods of archaeological analysis, and brought acute insight to past works of skill, meaning, and beauty. When Mike died on September 25, 2019, he was halfway through his 5th k’atun, the consecutive Maya tabulation of 20-year spans. For over 70 years he had played a key role in the archaeological study of Mesoamerica. Harvard-trained in both his B.A. and Ph.D.—the latter with Gordon Willey, whose seminars he appreciated—Mike would have been the first to acknowledge that his allegiance was to Yale, where he spent all but a few years of his professional career. “Yale left me alone,” he would say with gratitude. There, he also trained a large and notably varied group of specialists in the ancient New World. The interests of his students, graduate and undergraduate alike, matched his own breadth. Mike’s legacy, which we describe here, will continue to ripple outward, as left by a person who mattered deeply to the field and to the friends and protégés that mourn his passing. Our intellectual overview begins with a glimpse at how Mike’s personality inflected his thinking and writing, touches on his vision of deep civilization and the long-term, describes his epigraphic and iconographic discoveries, reflects on his passion for museums and thoughtful display, and comes back, as a life of consequence must, to the person who so enriched others (Figure 1).

PERSONAL INFLECTIONS

Mike, as all called him—never “Dr. Coe,” a title he viewed as the affectation of lesser institutions—wrote his own self-account, *Final Report: An Archaeologist Excavates His Past* (Coe 2006a; for obituaries, see Ardren 2020; Houston 2019; Roberts 2019; Smith 2019). Another 14 years was to come of productivity and energetic travel, belying the summative title of this book. Mike’s own words do justice to those wanting to know about his early years, his attachment to the Fay School as a somewhat neglected child at home, or his years of working for the “Company,” as he cautiously termed the Central Intelligence Agency. We have not pursued the Freedom of Information Act to add more to what he himself told about his stay in Taiwan during the beginnings of the Cold War. The profound impact of his Company years, from

1950 to 1954, would be that Mike always thought broadly, across many cultures. There were particular comparisons that fascinated him: the color/directionality, sacred kingship, and tropical urbanism of Angkor Wat and the sixteenth-century records for Maya towns recorded in Diego de Landa’s *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (or, rather, the composite document we label in that manner; Restall and Chuchiak 2002); the lacustrine and canalized cities of Venice and Tenochtitlan; and the backstrap loom of Southeast Asia and the New World, which Mike doubted had been invented twice. How could he not be intrigued by the similarities in bark beaters on either side of the Pacific Ocean? Perhaps because of his wide travel, there was in Mike a particular affection for diffusionist thought, perhaps because it implied bold adventures like his own but in the distant past. This may account for his forays into Costa Rican archaeology or, early in his career, stray articles on links to South America (Baudez and Coe 1966). He confessed to us an early love of novels by H. Rider Haggard and Lew Wallace, authors of books decidedly in the “lost world” genre. For Mike, there had to be an enthralling story. He told many of them, buttressed by evidence and acts of perception, in numerous publications that we compile here.

Mike did not master written or spoken Mandarin in those years with Kuomintang generals. It was a world he was to describe as a “House of Mirrors.” Proving to be a spy, one “genial dinner companion” was later whisked away from Paich’üan (Xiju), the channel island where Mike served, to be shot in Taiwan (Coe 2006a:84). But the Chinese writing system opened his eyes to mixed scripts, which did not always adhere to the structures of Western writing. His publications on Formosan ethnography and earlier travels in (then) British Honduras and Yucatan with his brother, William Coe, showed his vivid appreciation of life in warm and lush places (Coe 1950, 1954, 1955; Coe and Coe 1956).

People interested Mike, the quirkiest the better, filling stories he would tell with relish and éclat. A lesson soon learned by his students was, respond to anyone, anyone at all, who asks an honest question. Take seriously the need for nonacademics to know. From this came his popular books on chocolate (Coe and Coe 1996), the decoding of Maya script (Coe 1992), his handy guide to reading glyphs (Coe and Van Stone 2001), many editions of textbooks for students and travelers, and, a favorite from our childhoods, an evocative account of early civilizations in Mesoamerica (Coe 1968a). The volume with his wife, Sophie, came from his promise to complete this book after her death, a loss that devastated him a month before his retirement in 1994. It was a double homage as well, for the title, *The True History of Chocolate*, gestured to one

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Figure 1. Mike at Yaxchilan, Mexico, 2012. Photographer unknown.

of Mike's heroes of the sixteenth century, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, author of the *True History of the Conquest of Mexico* (García 1908–1916). Therein, Mike protested the wretched conditions of plantation-grown cacao, for he would want to be remembered as someone standing up to corporate greed. Mike also “taught” by serving, in later years, as an authoritative guide for luxurious trips organized by Far Horizons, a tour company.

How he produced so much, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, for both general and technical readers, is a source of amazement. His daughter Natalie comments, “I once asked my father how he stayed so disciplined with his writing, and he looked utterly perplexed by the question, finally answering, ‘I just sit down and write!’ I don’t think any alternative even occurred to him!” With his wife, Sophie (Figure 2), daughter of Theodosius Dobzhansky, the preeminent geneticist and evolutionary biologist, Mike was also raising, in the midst of busy academic work, five children, Nicholas, Andrew, Sarah, Peter, and Natalie, while maintaining a weekend home in Heath, Massachusetts, outfitted with Shaker furniture and a second, working library. (Given the address, he liked to call himself a true “Heathen.”) The need to write up his excavations in Mexico, the rigors of running a dig in the Olmec heartland, a bout of bad malaria, and a young family led him to historical archaeology in New England. The “Line of Forts” in northwestern Massachusetts, created by the British to protect settlers against incursions from French Canada, lay close to his second home, and one of them, Fort Shirley, was in Heath itself, a tempting target for seasonal excavations by Mike and his local team (Coe 1977a, 2006b). Mike did such work almost by bibliographic campaign, marshalling a large collection of relevant books (those on Angkor filled part of his home library) and then, in good order, marching on to research and writing. Doing the latter without the former would have been incomprehensible to Mike: evidence and authoritative study first! On arrival in New Haven, students came to share in double time this life lesson about writing early and often.

Mike often credited his ease and clarity of expression with lessons hard won at the Fay School, where Mike boarded until the seventh grade. His general books for the publisher Thames and Hudson benefited from the guidance of Colin Ridler, regarded by Mike as the most expert and facilitative of editors in archaeology. Indeed, his own outreach extended close to home, in generous gestures to his students. Through his friends, Josef and Anni Albers, artists and teachers at the Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, and finally at Yale, Mike secured a donation of funds for student research and sponsored the publication of the collection they had donated to the university; this helped to support one of us in the process (Taube 1988). There were countless recommendations, an emphatic phone call or letter to potential employers, or publicly voiced satisfaction in his protégés’ careers. He expressed pleasure in being taught by former students, now producing their own books and articles. Such affection was reciprocated to heartfelt extent, through many testimonials (Houston 2020, for a compilation of remembrances). Mike understood that to be gifted with resources and ability was also to give in turn. Up to his final week, he was still emailing about substantive matters, engaged in debates and offering tart observations that hit the mark. He gave away at least two libraries, and no meal with Mike was possible without letting him foot the bill.

Mike disdained pomposity. This might have come from his Yankee, sea captain forebears in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, or the no-nonsense acumen of his great-grandfather, Henry Huttleston Rogers (1840–1909), a founder of Standard Oil and close friend of another straight talker, Mark Twain. Yet Mike’s background might have inclined him in a different direction. Perhaps his ease among the well-heeled, or his time among generals, champion boxers, literary figures, celebrities, and aristocratic relatives (an English lord, an Italian count), meant that he had nothing to prove and no one he needed to impress. The sprawling family home, Planting Fields, had among its treasures a set of eighteenth-century



Figure 2. Mike and Sophie Coe at Hadrian's Villa, Tivoli, Italy, 1990. Photograph by Natalie Coe.

iron gates of imposing size; taken from Carshalton Park, England, these served as backdrops for more than a few movies. In seeming paradox, the interiors in the mansion at Planting Fields were at once grand and welcoming, with hints of informal humor: the breakfast room showed romping buffalo, in a nod to family ownership of Buffalo Bill Cody's hunting camp in Wyoming. A home movie shows Mike, Laurel-and-Hardy style or perhaps in some vaudeville mime, exchanging bowler hats with the English novelist Evelyn Waugh; a self-assured Mike was all of 20, staying with his uncle, a high-ranking diplomat. Mike did not stand on ceremony. When Mary Miller reintroduced Mike to Everett Miller, her cousin and gardener at Planting Fields before the Second World War, it led to an informed restoration of the gardens.

Mike's confidence may explain why he never deferred, in Mesoamerican studies and elsewhere, to dominant figures like Eric Thompson or to politicians and bureaucrats, academic or otherwise. Sincerity and solid argument, clearly presented, counted most for Mike. This was more than contrarianism. For Mike, established wisdom, if wrong, needed correction. He himself would respond to fresh evidence and readily change his mind, not, perhaps, a common tendency among academics. It gave us satisfaction to see his delight, a lambent glow, when presented with some new idea or exciting

find. Two of us (Houston and Taube) were present when he viewed the Cascajal Block for the first time, projecting almost boyish wonder at this prodigy of early writing in the New World (Figure 3; Rodríguez Martínez et al. 2006). His secure footing and sense of himself obviated any need to join organizations or lobby for personal advancement, although honors did come his way, including membership in the National Academy of Sciences (he wore its multihued lapel pin with pride) and a knighthood in Guatemala's *Orden del Quetzal*, that country's highest honor. The ribboned *Quetzal* badge and its certificate hung close to the door of his inner office at home, along with drawings he commissioned for various books. This confidence gave Mike a fearlessness—was it even eagerness?—while combating academic folly. His armor was thick, and he could handle counter-comment or dispute. One did not want to get into a scrap with Mike over some matter he knew to be wrong or, worse, to go after one of his present or former students. He was fiercely loyal, and, typically, his collaborators over the years, including the distinguished Mexicanist, Richard Diehl, with whom he excavated San Lorenzo, remained close friends for life. Diehl had been recommended by his professor at The Pennsylvania State University, William Sanders, with Mike a fellow graduate of Harvard and



Figure 3. Richard Diehl and Mike seeing the Cascajal Block for the first time, Veracruz, 2006. Photograph by Karl Taube.

someone of markedly different views about the nature of ancient Mesoamerica. Mike did not take most debates personally. Friendship, as with Sanders, might flourish in the midst of disagreement. Perhaps because he had spent so much time in the Western United States, Mike was also drawn into disputes about the reliability of the Book of Mormon as an historical source (Coe 1973a, 1973b). Yet he could not have heaped more praise on colleagues who were Latter-day Saints, particularly those associated with the New World Archaeological Foundation; John Clark and Gareth Lowe were singled out for special admiration. Eventually a teetotaler, long a loather of tobacco, Mike would declare himself, with some license but genuine sympathy, an “honorary Mormon.”

In archaeology, we are taught to find truth in the quantitative. But, with Mike, there was a strongly aesthetic dimension to his publications. A subjective appeal, an overall elegance, needed to be present for that work to be successful. This could be in prose, his own or others, a suitable concern for someone who had studied English literature at Harvard. In fact, it is hard to think of other scholars, other than, in the recent past, Jill Lepore or E.O. Wilson, with his powers of factual reporting and appraisal. His judicious “eye” struck visitors to his home on St. Ronan Street in New Haven: the John Atkinson Grimshaw paintings, crepuscular and sinister, as though illustrating some horror story by M.R. James (whose stories he enjoyed); the apocalyptic painting by John Martin, looming over a comfy couch; a magnificent Marquesan war club; and, in his inner office, sketches by Miguel Covarrubias, whose total vision of Mesoamerican forms resonated with Mike on intellectual, artistic, and emotional grounds. Mike’s dissemination of Covarrubias’ “lost notebooks,” a rich quarry of drawings, some of

objects since disappeared, was one of his later acts of generosity to the field (Coe 2012).

Mike loved books, his own and those of others. When Mike was in London, he placed the smallest advertisement possible in *The Times*, seeking rare volumes. In this he succeeded. One trove, the complete elephant folios of *Antiquities of Mexico* by Kingsborough (1830–1848), was duly shipped home. But of greater rarity—and a lifelong prize—was his acquisition of Cooper Clark’s (1938) three-volume edition of the Codex Mendoza. The majority of copies, still unsold in 1940, were stored in a warehouse destroyed that year in the Battle of Britain. We observed before that Mike did not much stand on ceremony. For that reason, he addressed the Major, Cooper Clark, by the military title he had earned in WWI and in service in British Honduras, where he was the righthand man to Dr. Thomas Gann (a medical doctor, very different from a Ph.D. in Mike’s view). But Mike was insistent that anyone who touched the volumes cite them correctly. “Cooper Clark,” please, no hyphens, no dropping of one or the other of the surnames in some double-barrelled error. For Mike, perhaps channeling Mies van der Rohe, it was not so much “God is in the details” as “arguments rise or fall on precision of knowledge.” To daunting extent, one could expect immediate correction if caught in some error or by failing to show the right level of learning. That applied to more specialized knowledge as well. Lord help the oaf who called one of his cherished fishing rods a “pole,” for Mike was as “compleat” an angler as Isaak Walton, hungry for any contest with exotic fish or those running off Montauk. His description of enraged sailfish, flashing colorfully in the Pacific ocean, south of Guatemala, displayed his talent for story-telling.

Mike’s own books were stylish. Aesthetics and quality of execution mattered deeply, and each volume reflected an optimum of design. His *The Maya Scribe and His World* (Coe 1973c) had plates by the celebrated Meriden Gravure Company, received its design from the renowned typographer, Norman Ives, and came from an exhibit at the Grolier Club, a major seat of bibliophilia (Figure 4) to which Mike himself did not seek membership. The drawings were by Diane Griffiths Peck, in inked renderings or “roll-outs” of cylindrical or irregularly shaped ceramics. In this book, Mike’s goal was to reproduce the standards by the water-colorist



Figure 4. Mike while preparing the Grolier Club Exhibit, “Ancient Maya Calligraphy,” 1971. Photograph by Paul Hosefros, courtesy of Alfred Bush.

Mary Louise Baker for volumes commissioned generations before, in folios produced by the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania (Dosker 1985; Gordon and Mason 1925–1928). Peck's achievement seems all the greater because these drawings, done with a rapidograph as fine as a hypodermic needle, were taken from paper tracings of the actual pots. In Peck's words, these images, when laid flat, were adjusted by "some tucks and expansions, as in a Mercator projection map of the world, to fit the 3D vase onto a 2D surface" (Diane G. Peck, personal communication 2020). Mike's understanding of the illustrative and explanatory power of images led to other collaborations, with Felipe Dávalos, Will Goetzmann, and, in the pocket maps for his excavation of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan, Robert Williams of the Yale Map Laboratory (Coe and Diehl 1980). That opus had an impressive case for its two volumes—a throne on one side was matched by its back on the other—his book on a Maya exhibit at the Princeton Art Museum sported a textured, cross-weave surface (Coe 1978a), and the study of ceramics at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection was loose-leaf, with frameable prints snug in their portfolio (Coe 1975a). Mike's main collaborator in documenting the past was Justin Kerr, his longstanding friend and a photographer in New York City. In 1975, Kerr succeeded in perfecting a rollout camera, a turntable synchronized with a medium-format Hasselblad, to speed up the production of rollouts (Kerr 1978: 139). That joint effort led to a pioneering book on Maya calligraphy, which Mike, more than others, brought to broader attention and made a subject of serious inquiry (Coe and Kerr 1997). His enthusiasm for such works was categorical, and he once said to us: "anyone not studying these should have their head examined!" Mike was a man of exclamation points.

Much of Mike's library concerning ancient Mesoamerica was held in his inner office in the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale, and he freely allowed access to his library to graduate students, a testimony to both his generosity and trust. As a mentor, Mike was equally supportive of female as well as male students, in striking contrast to the generally male-dominated field during the first half of the twentieth century. Among the female graduate students that Mike mentored were Traci Ardren, Louise Burkhart, Louise Paradis, Mary Socci, Barbara Stark, Barbara Voorhies, and Judith Zeitlin. In addition, many Yale undergraduate students who studied with Mike, both in Anthropology and Archaeological Studies, the interdisciplinary major that he had pioneered in the 1970s, pursued careers in New World archaeology, among them Richard Burger, Robert Cobean, John Hoopes, Megan O'Neil, and, in Latin American Studies, Khris Villela.

DEEP CIVILIZATION

The first half of the twentieth century was marked by American and British romance for the ancient Maya, whose calendrical glyphs and correlation to the Christian calendar had been deciphered late in the nineteenth century. The same Anglo-American, Maya-centric view of Mesoamerica also blocked, especially among foreign researchers, the understanding of deeper time in the region. Beginning with his dissertation research, eventually published by Harvard's Peabody Museum, Mike (Coe 1961a) threw his lot in with the Mexican thinkers who had proposed a "mother culture," among them Miguel Covarrubias, a polymath like Mike and someone just as smitten with the island of Bali, which Mike visited many times. (Indeed, his memorial service in Battell Chapel at Yale was structured in part around a performance of Yale's very own gamelan orchestra,

a percussive ensemble of Indonesian music.) Other influences on Mike included Alfonso Caso, the founding director of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History, and Ignacio Bernal, Caso's successor and a good friend of our mentor's. Mike went all in on the Olmec, a civilization whose reach he identified from its Gulf Coast heartland to the Pacific Coast of Guatemala and to the region of Mexico City. A token of his commitment: generations of family automobiles with an "OLMEC" license plate. Later, Mike would sum this up with a clever critique, "Fall of the House of Ussher," closing the door on the lingering impact of Archbishop Ussher, who had determined the creation of the earth to have taken place at twilight on October 22, 4004 B.C. (Coe 1968b). His "Cycle 7 Monuments in Middle America: A Reconsideration" was a direct assault on Thompson's (1941) insistence that the dates on "certain inscriptions of non-Maya origin" were invalid indications of early use of script (cf. Coe 1957a). Instead, Mike insisted on the continuity of calendrical record-keeping that extended well before the fourth-century A.D. dates favored by Thompson.

That was a big claim for a graduate student, and perhaps even greater was "Pre-Classic Cultures in Mesoamerica: A Comparative Survey," also of 1957 (Coe 1957b), in which Mike wrote with conviction and panache. He brought new scientific data from radiocarbon and demonstrated his lifelong conviction that ceramics told a story. His student Barbara Stark commented that his capacity for synthesis from potsherds seemed quite "impossible" from the evidence then at hand (Houston 2020:25). How he managed to make sense of stray pieces of information—she called this act of legerdemain "uncanny," "a still-relevant synthesis conjured from scraps"—continued to astonish her after decades of research in Veracruz (Houston 2020:25). He made the case for 1500 years of Preclassic Mesoamerica, roughly back to 1500 B.C., with all the foundations of religious practice and belief system that would be in play at the time of the Spanish invasion. In this, his early excavations and extensive survey with a very young Kent Flannery opened up the substrate of that civilization in coastal Guatemala and Chiapas; by attending to microenvironments, they anticipated by many decades the recent burst of geographical scholarship among the Maya (Coe and Flannery 1964a, 1967; Flannery and Coe 1967). A far later essay with colleagues detected the presence of chocolate production and use as a prime force behind some local cultivation (Powis et al. 2008).

Mike was intrigued by technology. His mastery of Photoshop and digital cameras put us to shame—he ascended by hot-air balloon over Angkor to capture a choice photo of the ruins—and Mike used a new scientific tool, the magnetometer, when he excavated at San Lorenzo to locate buried monuments of the Early Preclassic (Figure 5; Breiner and Coe 1972). His focus on photogrammetric mapping around San Lorenzo was inspired by Hal Conklin (1980), a Yale colleague and incomparable ethnographer active in studies of terracing among the Ifugao of Luzon, Philippines. Mike demonstrated the destruction of the ancient settlement by 900 B.C., using radiocarbon, and then, with his former undergraduate student, Bob Cobean (Cobean et al. 1971), explored the enmeshing of that site in trade networks of obsidian (see also his report on the El Chayal source of this volcanic glass [Coe and Flannery 1964b]). The excavation by David Cheetham (2010) of an apparent Olmec "colony" at Cantón Corralito reaffirmed his sense of how tight those networks might be (see also studies by his former student, Jeffrey Blomster, with colleagues [Cheetham and Blomster 2017]; [Neff et al. 2006a, 2006b]). Mike believed



Figure 5. Mike after excavating Monument 34, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, Mexico, 1967. Photograph courtesy of the estate of Michael Coe.

that sufficiently deep excavations in the Maya region would yield comparable evidence of early dates. Takeshi Inomata and Daniela Triadan's discovery, published with colleagues (Inomata et al. 2013, 2015), of Olmec jade in context at Ceibal, ca. 900 B.C., was the sort of find that Mike had predicted 60 years earlier. Inomata and Triadan have since gone on to inject other, welcome complexities that would have delighted Mike, a massive LiDAR capture that showed immense platforming of an early date at Ceibal, Guatemala, and the enigmatic rectangular site plans, with causeways and evident pools, at Aguada Fénix, Tabasco (Inomata et al. 2019, 2020). It was a pleasure for Mike that his home department at Yale filled his slot post-retirement with a succession of exemplary young Mayanists, beginning with Takeshi, but then going on to Marcello Canuto and, eventually, now tenured, Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos.

For Mike, the Olmec were an entity united by what he called "mental systems" (structured beliefs and practices of high intricacy) building on political bonds that centered on San Lorenzo, Veracruz, the sprawling settlement he had excavated with Diehl. His student David Joralemon (1971, 1996) tested and extended Mike's ideas with the Las Limas statue, discerning its pattern of quadripartite beings in cosmic ordering; one of us has vindicated the identification of deities, consistent in their attributes, including a Maize and Rain God (Taube 2004, 2009). The idea that ritual patterns might configure landscapes must have gone back to his earlier visits to Yucatan, especially at the causeway-heavy city of Coba (Coe and Coe 1949), and to subsequent studies of how pre-Columbian communities were laid out and integrated by the movement of sacred

effigies (Coe 1965). Mike was as interested as other scholars in ancient settlement and the agricultural means by which it was supported, but he was also a great admirer of the cultural themes explored by the Carnegie Institution of Washington (Coe 1990), lambasted by one critic as "an archeology which is on the intellectual level of stamp collecting" (Kluckhohn 1940:45).

As we shall see, Mike was alert to the good things in life, especially food, but he also understood the role of belief. Human motivations were about more than caloric intake and raw impulses to domination. In this there must have been decisive influence from his visits to Cambodia before and after the horrors of the Indochinese conflicts and Pol Pot. The freshness of his thoughts about Khmer civilization built on typologies of tropical cities (Coe 1961b) and found synthetic expression in his overview of Indic civilization and its absorption in Southeast Asia (Coe 2003; for a much expanded version, now replete with LiDAR images processed by his coauthor, see Coe and Evans 2018). That Mike was not a card-carrying specialist in Khmer archaeology allowed him to see what was essential. Mike rejoiced in the romantic mystery of such places, telling us with evident pleasure of king cobras tracking down hapless tourists in the 1950s. Whether these reptiles actually behaved in that way—they tend to attack only when provoked—was beside the point. A 1954 photo of Mike shows him in "pukka sahib" gear, pith helmet firmly on his head, in explorer's pose on the tarmac at Siem Reap, Cambodia. He was already on the road to the adventures that enlivened his 90 years (Coe 2006a:Figure 18).

GLYPHS AND GODS

Proskouriakoff, the decoder of history in Maya glyphs, would use argument as a mental whetstone. Debate helped to sharpen thought. "If you said this paper was of poor quality...she would take precisely the opposite view—no, it was the finest paper ever made" (Shook and Houston 1990:250). Mike, a friend of Proskouriakoff's, described her as "gloriously contrary" (Coe 1992:155). If others believed the Maya had deities, then, to Proskouriakoff (1965:470), surely those beings, which she termed "grotesques," could not "be conceived as describing definite entities." Mike was not himself inherently disputatious, although his book reviews could strike the jugular (e.g., Coe 1978b). Yet he could take controversial and later vindicated positions about Maya writing.

In late 1955 or early 1956, a chance discovery in Mérida, Yucatan, of a Spanish-language pamphlet by Knorosov led him to champion the logosyllabic nature of glyphic writing. Sophie happened to be fluent in Russian, and her translation of Knorosov's main work into English introduced many scholars to the striking insights of this codebreaker (Proskouriakoff 1967; see also Knorosov 1958). As a partisan of Knorosov, Mike was dogged and necessarily so, for Thompson, regarded as the leading authority on Maya writing, would not fold on the proposal that phonetic syllables existed in glyphic texts. (Thompson had yielded quickly on Proskouriakoff's dynastic discoveries; Thompson 1971:v.) Mike coaxed his colleague at Yale, the distinguished Iroquoianist, Floyd Lounsbury, into taking on this cause as well. Lounsbury was hooked but later said to us, with a slightly pained expression, Maya glyph studies were "an addiction, a disease." A joint paper demonstrated the strength of their collaboration (Lounsbury and Coe 1968). Despite the mutual respect, Mike could be impatient with Floyd's lasering in on detail. In studies of imagery—especially a proposal by Floyd about the so-called "Palenque Triad" of gods—Mike urged that scholars "examine all known occurrences of a

particular iconic entity, and to analyze its behavior with other entities” (Coe 1989:166).

Mike understood intuitively what would work and what would not. His review of a volume on the purported decipherment of Indus writing remains essential reading (Coe 1995). The recipe for success: copious documentation of source materials; known languages plausibly recorded in the script; a well-understood cultural setting; bilingual texts that link legible writing to the undeciphered system—for us the crucial ingredient; and pictorial referents that explain and accompany texts—for us, indispensable too, particularly for a hieroglyphic system predicated on images. However well-intentioned, some proposed decipherments founder, as Mike showed, when these traits are absent (Houston and Coe 2003). He was a sharp questioner of flimsy ideas. Particular ire fell on Thompson’s “anagogical” or mystical approach that would have been recognizable to the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (Coe 1992:141). For Thompson and Kircher, an early but failed decoder of Egyptian hieroglyphs, vague mentalities were the goal, not records of language. In fairness, Thompson did identify certain word signs, but, to curious extent, they seemed orphaned from grammar.

The matter of syllables is now settled, yet the point is that at a time when courage was needed, Mike put vigorous effort into promoting what he knew to be true. If Thompson dismissed most texts on painted pottery as illiterate imitations of Maya writing, Mike showed to overwhelming extent that there was patterning in such glyphs, and ironically enough, the thousands of texts appearing on Classic Maya ceramics have now proved a great boon for the decipherment of Maya writing. In addition, the imagery on these pots accorded with systematic patterns; Mike credibly tied some of them, especially various twins or youths, to the later K’iche’ epic, the Popol Vuh (Coe 1973c). To Mike, for example, goes credit for bringing the Maya “rain beast,” the deity Chahk, back into view (Coe 1978a:76–77). And from Mike we learned to value the calligraphy on pots. These were surely made by the scribes who created the books he detected in such images, along with the supernaturals he termed “patrons” of ancient script (Coe 1977b). His account of the many Maya decipherments—there were distinct breakthroughs, not just one—continues to be, after Chadwick’s (2014) volume on Linear B, the single best description of such an undertaking. His study of the first steps to writing in Mesoamerica still informs research on the origins of script, and not a few of his students, including Javier Urcid and Gordon Whittaker, went on to study non-Maya traditions of script (Coe 1976). Mike’s interest in esoteric belief and ritual led him to work with Whittaker on a definitive edition of Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón’s inquisitorial treatise of incantations among the colonial Nahuatl (Coe and Whittaker 1982).

Mike was a first-rate interpreter of glyphs. He applied Proskouriakoff’s ideas about Maya history and discerned lords and rulers in carvings at Dumbarton Oaks (Coe and Benson 1966). Mike always knew, to his core, that the ancient Maya had such dynastic figures, writing an early piece on the “funerary pyramid” in lowland cities (Coe 1956). His study of various objects, including a wooden box now in the Library of Congress attests to keen epigraphic instincts (Coe 1974; see also Turner and Coe 2018). Attuned to public interest, Mike craved a “scoop.” He wanted to be the first to present important objects, if with comments from some quarters that, for varying reasons, unprovenanced objects deserved little to no attention from scholars. Mike’s approach arose from his sheer joy in these pieces but also a sense of intellectual duty to the people who produced them. To ignore these objects was, in his mind, a stilling of ancient voices, although it is fair to

say some colleagues held strongly divergent views about artifacts trafficked from their lands of origin.

The Maya material fascinated Mike from earliest years to latest. In the early 1980s, he had contemplated a return to Maya archaeology at Piedras Negras, Guatemala, scene of Proskouriakoff’s triumphant work on historical texts, but the project foundered on cultural politics and the increasing tumult of the region: an encounter with *guerilleros* on an exploratory trip doubtless reduced the appeal of working along the Usumacinta River. Among his achievements was the detection of the “Primary Standard Sequence,” a formulaic sequence of glyphs that Maya likened to a “Book of the Dead,” now interpreted as a statement of ownership, authorship, as well as the form, use, and contents of ceramic vessels. On current evidence, a purely mortuary function for such pots seems improbable. Mike had been strongly influenced by the “hero twins” on such vessels. In the Popol Vuh, which Mike took as a template for long-term Maya beliefs (albeit with a nod to many narratives on pots that were not in that epic [Coe 1973c:16]), such figures tormented underworld lords, experienced miraculous rebirths, and overcame death by trickster cunning (Coe 1973c:18–22). Here, for Mike, was an expansive explanation for why such pots were equipped with glyphs and imagery—they served the dead and, in feasts, comforted the living. He drew attention to particular deities, including the skeletal death deity and Gods L and N, and postulated an underworld court, inspiring an animated film of the Popol Vuh (Amelin 1989) that would bring Maya religious narrative to widespread recognition. When forgers cottoned on to his work, Mike not only called them out but served the IRS in identifying tax cheats over inflated valuations and outright fakes. The most severe of Mike’s deprecations was to accuse someone of having “wooden eyes,” meaning an incapacity to see visual patterns or to distinguish between a fake and an authentic object. This was not just a matter of connoisseurial hand waving, a belief in authority for its own sake; it resulted from careful looking and judicious appraisal of comparanda (Coe and Miller 2004). That it could be, with Mike, a near-instantaneous judgment reflected the decades of work he had put into looking hard. Yet, in returning to the Popol Vuh, the extent to which that colonial-era document operated as a comprehensive map to ancient Maya myth remains a subject of debate (e.g., Chinchilla Mazariégos 2017:41–48). In staking out a large claim for it, Mike nonetheless inspired many students. Underlying stories could unite disparate, seemingly disjointed images. All three of us came to Yale in large measure to work with the author of *The Maya Scribe and His World* (Coe 1973c).

MIKE AND MUSEUMS

Ambassador Robert Woods Bliss, founder, with his wife Mildred, of Dumbarton Oaks as a museum, garden, and public venue in 1940, sought out Mike in his senior year at Harvard, taking him to lunch at the Faculty Club to chat about their shared interests in Mesoamerica. This was to some consternation of University leaders, or so Mike recounted to one of us (Miller) in the fall of 2018. After the Ambassador died in 1962, Mildred Bliss asked Mike to succeed Samuel Kirkland Lothrop as standing adviser to the collection. Mike worked closely with John Thacher, the Director, and Betty Benson, director of Pre-Columbian Studies, shepherding the excellent existing collection and eliminating some fakes; he worked with Betty to produce the handbook to the holdings that celebrated the opening of the 1963 Philip Johnson addition to the Museum (Benson and Coe 1963). Mike and

Benson also developed the fellowship program that would help establish pre-Columbian studies in the United States as an area of study that could thrive in both art history and anthropology. He published the Maya parts of the collection that were of greatest interest: first, *Three Maya Relief Panels*, mentioned before (Coe and Benson 1966a), *An Early Stone Pectoral from Southeastern Mexico* (Coe 1966a), and, later, *Classic Maya Pottery at Dumbarton Oaks* (Coe 1975a). These were only supplanted later by a superb catalogue that took many scholars to do what Mike and Benson had accomplished by themselves (Pillsbury et al. 2012).

Just as Mike's work for Dumbarton Oaks was moving into high gear, he also took on a major exhibition for the Museum of Primitive Art, where Robert Goldwater was director and Douglas Newton curator (its holdings have since been folded into the Metropolitan Museum of Art). Assembled mainly from private collections and New York dealers, *The Jaguar's Children* exhibition received a rave review from John Canaday (1965) in the *New York Times*. Assessment of the resulting book was more mixed but included

an endorsement (if quibbling about chronology) from Mexican archaeologist Román Piña Chan (1966). Later, in the 1980s, the governor of Veracruz sought out Mike's advice for the new state museum in Jalapa, as did the director of the Museo de América, in Madrid, even though little of his hand is visible in both today. Mike worked closely with Jay Levenson to secure stunning works in Europe for the landmark quinqucentenary exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, "Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration." Asked to review the collection made by painter Frederick Church in the nineteenth century and preserved at Church's estate, Olana, along the Hudson River, Mike discovered that the works were not authentic, and the invitation was withdrawn. He thrived on revealing fakes (Coe and Houston 2017), as he did in a scathing review of *Maya Treasures*, a traveling nationwide exhibition (Coe 1986).

Mike's greatest achievement as a curator was the exhibition, "Ancient Maya Calligraphy," held at The Grolier Club in New York in 1971. Seeking to push Maya hieroglyphic decipherment forward, Coe worked with US dealers and collectors to bring



Figure 6. Mike being blessed by an elephant, Kerala, India, date unknown. Photograph courtesy of the estate of Michael Coe.

together dozens of Maya ceramic vessels that bore writing for this exhibition, and held at an institution devoted to printing. But back in 1969 he had seen photographs of what he believed to be a genuine Maya codex at a dinner party at the home of Josué and Jacqueline Saenz, owners of the vast collection now at the Museo Amparo in Puebla, and he had brought a photographic sample back to New Haven, where his colleague Floyd Lounsbury worked out the calendrics of the manuscript and agreed on its authenticity. Nevertheless, the Mexican owners believed it to be a forgery, and one which they had not shown to Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), but rather only to their personal adviser, José Luis Franco, who found it a likely fake for reasons not altogether clear. The Saenz family had been the single largest private lender to the major exhibition, *Before Cortés* (Easby and Scott 1970), following all legal protocols. The manuscript, however, subsequently dubbed the Grolier Codex and now known as the Códice Maya de México, simply appeared in New York, in the hands of dealer Edward Merrin, who facilitated its loan to The Grolier Club. When word of the codex appeared in the *New York Times* (Gent 1971), Mexico was aghast, and Mike was in a hot seat. He would spend the next 18 months completing the individual studies of the works in the exhibition and laboring with Diane Griffiths Peck to proof her hand-drawn rollouts. The book sold out quickly, and a completely new vision of Maya painting and writing was available for all to see. The most powerful Mayanist of his day, Thompson, denounced the manuscript as a fake (of course, for Thompson was his persistent “frenemy”), and Mike would turn periodically during the rest of his life to proving its authenticity. In 2015 the authors of this obituary coauthored as exhaustive a study of the “Fourth Maya Codex” as could be carried out without physical examination of the book. Subsequently, a team of INAH and Biblioteca Nacional scholars presented iron-clad scientific evidence of the book’s authenticity (Martínez del Campo Lanz 2018). Mike’s enthusiastic and positive review of the coauthored volume was his final solo work of scholarship (Coe 2019).

At Yale, Mike became faculty curator at Yale Peabody Museum in 1967, a position he took on with gusto, a few years after he had received tenure on the faculty and shortly before becoming chair of the department. He reviewed the existing collections, including an Aztec “calendar stone” featuring the myth of the Five Suns acquired by the museum in the nineteenth century and inspected by Eduard Seler early in the twentieth, for a permanent exhibition on the Peabody’s ground floor. Mike was particularly proud of the cast of San Lorenzo Colossal Head 4, long a New Haven school child favorite. After the exhibition was dismantled in the twenty-first century, Mike would comment with acerbity about the “schlock shop” in the Peabody to all who would hear him out. Even before

Mike taught a semester course on Mesoamerican art at Princeton University, in about 1970, he had built a deep and sometimes wary friendship with Gillett, curator at The Art Museum of Princeton. Why wary? Because Gillett, often a bit intoxicated, was one of the most dangerous drivers Mike knew. Under the best of conditions our mentor was somewhat phobic about being a passenger, and Gillett treated the backroads of western Massachusetts, where he also had a home, as if he were Mario Andretti...with, in Mike’s words, as recalled by Natalie Coe, a tendency to “wrap himself around trees.” But their friendship would underpin another curatorial project, *Lords of the Underworld*, focused on the Maya vase now known as the “Princeton Vase,” a celebration of that vessel and the larger project of revealing ancient Maya beliefs (Coe 1978a). Here, Kerr’s rollouts represented a leap forward. Although they had long known one another, and Justin had taken the straight shots for *The Maya Scribe and His World*, *Lords* was their first major collaboration.

How would Mike wish to be remembered (Figure 6)? He wanted his general books to endure, choosing with care various co-authors to carry them on into future editions. His favorite article, as stated to us: a study of sacred books and monkey “patrons” in a paper he wrote, ever large-minded, to honor his antagonist Eric Thompson (Coe 1977a). Mike introduced many scientific approaches to Mesoamerica, pioneered ecological perspectives, established the broad outlines of current understandings of the Maya, drew impassioned attention to their imagery, defended views he knew to be right, and opened up broad paths to ancient myth and ritual. The breadth and impact of those contributions are not replicable today. We knew him as a person of insatiable curiosity and capacity for wonder. In his final years and months he was on to a new project, international whaling in the great age of sail. A bon vivant, Mike knew the ways of the table and of fine wines too, but, at a certain point, on doctor’s orders, he never tasted another drop. Sophie was one of the best home cooks in New Haven, from everyday pastas to great Russian Orthodox feasts. Mike was a free-ranging gastronome, and some of his last communications to us addressed both the nature of hospital food (nearly inedible) and the excellent ground-nut stew prepared by support staff to help him at home in his final weeks. For years, he and Sophie made an annual Thanksgiving trip to Venice, Italy, visits he made more recently with daughter Natalie and grandson Cassius. All the finest restaurants were familiar to him, and some of us, at his urging, retread those paths in the Venetian *sestieri* he loved. Above all, Mike was fearless, and he was fun. A book of over a century ago, *A Young Man in a Hurry*, offered short stories about fishing and wild scenery (Chambers 1904). Mike was that Young Man, forever youthful in his bustle. He left us, his friends, gasping in amazement at his energy, talent, and brilliance but mournful that he has now passed from our lives.

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APPENDIX

Additional works by Michael D. Coe that were not cited in this text are provided below.

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