

Pioneers in Maya Archaeology: **Alfred P. Maudslay: 1850-1931**

Submitted by Marta Barber

"Mesoamericanists must be glad that [Alfred] Maudslay did not choose to pursue a career in the Colonial Service, nor opt for archaeological investigations in Sri Lanka, ... because in either event, not only would the progress of Mesoamerican research have been greatly retarded in its early years, but the record of Maya inscriptions available to us now, more than a century later, from those ancient and steadily eroding monuments would be much less complete," writes Ian Graham in his informative biography, *Alfred Maudslay and the Maya*.

Alfred Percival Maudslay was born in Norwood, England, into a wealthy family. When Alfred graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, he entered the Colonial Service and served in posts such as Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. After six years, he resigned.

Inspired by John L. Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Central America*, Maudslay's next voyage took him to Belize, then known as British Honduras, and Guatemala. Maudslay knew he could not top Stephens' magnificent descriptions of life as he saw it. Photography, on the other hand, could complement the beautiful images Frederick Catherwood had drawn for that classic set of books. Maudslay had discovered his calling.

Quirigua, Tikal, Copán, Chichén Itzá and Palenque would be the focus of that calling, and Mayanists the beneficiaries. *Biologia Centrali-Americana* contains most



Alfred Maudslay worked at Palenque in 1890-1891, and appears here controlling the cleaning of the plaza from the tower of the Palacio.

of Maudslay's photographs and drawings. Published in 1898 and 1902, this magnificent collection is the first corpus of Maya inscriptions; what would become 20th Century scholars' move to decipher what the Maya had to say. Together with his photograph plates, Maudslay, with the help of Italian plaster expert, Lorenzo Giuntini, and Gorgonio Lopez, who worked paper-mache, made casts of monuments at those sites.

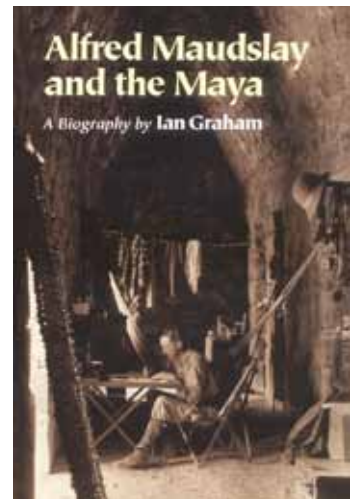
The Maudslay Collection at the British Museum contains 400 plaster casts, paper and plaster molds, glass negatives and journals written during those expeditions. These have been essential in the advances made in Maya epigraphy. The collection also includes nine stone monuments from Copán and eight lintels from Yaxchilán. Room 27 of the British Museum has on display the magnificent lintels 24 and 25 from Yaxchilán, two of the most important artistic achievements of the Classic Maya. All of these pieces were brought to England by Maudslay.

It is obvious from the details we know of Maudslay's personal life that exploring was his great love. In Victorian England, it probably wasn't too appealing to women to travel to these places where comfort was not part of the lifestyle. Unlike his rival explorer Teobert Maler, known for his ill temper, Maudslay was known for his evenness of character and easy manners.

Finally, in 1892 he married Ann Cary Morris, a well-educated woman who traveled with Maudslay after their marriage. Annie, as she was called, came from distinguished English families. She was also a descendant of Powhatan and Pocahontas. Her grandfather, Gouverneur Morris, was one of America's Founding Fathers.

If all his work as an explorer of Maya sites were not enough, Maudslay, after settling down in their new Jacobean home near the English town of Fownhope, continued one of his major undertakings: translation into English of *The Conquest of Mexico*, by Bernal Díaz.

The cover of Ian Graham's biography shows Alfred Maudslay at work in one of the chambers of Las Monjas, Chichén Itzá, 1889. Photo by Henry Sweet.



He had realized for a long time the importance of colonial chronicles. At age 80, he began to translate Diego de Landa's *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*. Before dying, he was able to finish a first draft. He died in January 1931 and his ashes are buried in a crypt at Hereford Cathedral.

In Dec. 2007, David Stuart writes in his *Maya Decipherment* blog: "While skimming through Alfred Maudslay's memoir, *A Glimpse at Guatemala* (1899), I came across this interesting paragraph (p. 255) from his chapter devoted to 'The Hieroglyphic Inscriptions,' where he briefly characterizes the nature of the script:

"An attempt was ... made by Landa to construct an alphabet and to give a short example of phonetic writing; but in this he was not successful, for whatever phonetic value the glyphs may possess was probably of a syllabic and not of an alphabetic character."

"Maudslay's passing statement about the 'syllabic ... character' of Maya writing was never followed up directly, of course. His lost insight reminds me of Charles Bowditch's reasoned statements about the historical nature of inscriptions at Piedras Negras, published just a few years after Maudslay's book and which anticipated Proskouriakoff's work by more than five decades. Oddly, neither idea took root in those very early days of Maya glyph research."

As we know by now, Maudslay's insight – and Bowditch's – have been proven right.

Sources: *Alfred Maudslay and the Maya*, A Biography by Ian Graham; www.britishmuseum.org; <http://decipherment.wordpress.com/2007/12/18/alfred-maudslays-insight>.