

Pioneers in Maya Archaeology: Tatiana Proskouriakoff:

Submitted by Dave Quarterson

When Tatiana Proskouriakoff was born in Tomsk, Siberia, on January 23, 1909, no one could have imagined she would one day find herself half a world away in the jungles of Mexico and Central America devoted to Maya studies. Tania, as she would be known, not only opened a window into the history and architecture of Maya sites with her drawings of reconstructed crumbled buildings, but also became a key element in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing. Her name will be forever linked to Piedras Negras, the Classic Maya site on the Guatemalan bank of the Usumacinta River. It is all a very fascinating story ...



Tania as a student at the Pennsylvania State College school of architecture.

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Tania working on jades recovered from the Sacred Cenote at Chichén Itzá, in her office at the Peabody Museum, 1974. Courtesy of President & Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum, Harvard University (N 31681).

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and after the establishment of a new regime in Russia, the family decided to stay permanently in the United States, and moved to Philadelphia. In 1926, Tania enrolled at the Pennsylvania State College School of Architecture. A 1927 photo shows Tania as the only woman in the student architects' club. It wouldn't be the first time she would be the sole female in a field dominated by men. When she graduated in 1930, the Great Depression gripped America, reducing the erstwhile architect to working part time as a designer for a needlepoint studio. One day, upon visiting the University of Pennsylvania Museum, she became fascinated by the displays, motivating her to enroll in graduate school. Once there while volunteering for the Classics Department, her artistic abilities attracted the attention of Linton Satterthwaite, the University Museum's research director –

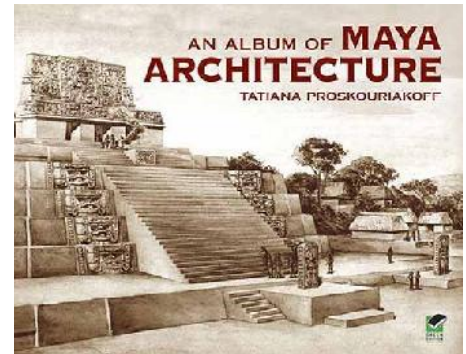
and de facto field director – for its Piedras Negras excavations. He asked her to join the 1936 expedition to the Usumacinta site, where she would be reimbursed only for her travel and living expenses.

Proskouriakoff's assignment was architectural drawings. During that first season, her architectural training led her to believe that there should be a stairway on the side of one of the structures she was mapping. Satterthwaite had concluded otherwise, but provided her a crew to dig, as a way of proving she was wrong. To Satterthwaite's bewilderment, the young architect was right. During this expedition, Proskouriakoff proved to be resourceful in adverse conditions, intuitive about the architecture of this Classic civilization as well as an excellent surveyor and artist. Satterthwaite invited her back for the 1937 expedition.

After returning to Philadelphia, Tania produced, among other things, architectural reconstructions of the Piedras Negras acropolis. Satterthwaite showed her work to Silvanus Morley of the Carnegie Institution of Washington (CIW). Morley realized the young architect's remarkable ability to visualize a ruined structure as it once stood, and render it with artistic precision.

With Satterthwaite's cooperation (Satterthwaite "fired" Tania so Morley could hire her), Morley offered Tania the opportunity to join CIW's 1939 expedition to Copán (in Honduras). There was one catch: Morley lacked the authority – and the funds – to hire her. Instead, he organized an "off-the-books" fund-raiser under the guise of "Friends of Copán" to send her to Honduras. This was the first time she was being paid for her work: \$500 for the season. She was later recruited by CIW for its 1940 expedition to Chichén Itzá.

Gustav Strømsvik, a native of Norway, was CIW's project director at Copán. His journal notes concerning



"A straightforward biography of a towering figure in Americanist research, examined through her own personal diaries and through the recollections of people who knew her and worked with her. In a way, it is a study of how one woman managed to change an entire field of research that was for most of its history a man's territory ... Anyone interested in Maya research and in the study of the ancient New World should find this fascinating." – Michael Coe, author of *Breaking the Maya Code*.

Tania reflect a diminutive, 30-year-old, who was not cowed by seniority, gender or jungle living. Strømsvik refers to frequent "arguments" with her about architectural details of the structures he was excavating and she was drawing. In one particular faceoff, Strømsvik, like Satterthwaite, was forced to concede, after a second dig, that Tania's architectural intuition was right.

For her part, Proskouriakoff comments in her journal that the exploration crew was making a mess out of consolidating the Copán's Hieroglyphic Stairway. Time would prove her intuition correct once again. In 1939, Tania was retained full time by CIW. (The Carnegie Institution of Washington was headquartered in Cambridge, Mass., near the Peabody Museum. The location would prove fortuitous for Proskouriakoff in later years.) Her primary responsibility for the next 15 years was surveying Maya sites and rendering those surveys into reconstruction drawings. A selection of her drawings was published in 1946 as the "Album of Maya Architecture" (see above). Morley commented that the publication, "... put Tania on the archaeological map."

Proskouriakoff, though, did much more than architectural renderings. She theorized that the evolution of Maya iconography could be used to date monuments that lacked calendrical information. To prove her theory, she undertook a painstakingly complex study comparing stylistic elements – feathers, earplugs, belts and sandals – found in Maya

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Tatiana Proskouriakoff

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monuments and graphed the time periods in which these styles predominated. This allowed fellow researchers and herself to find an approximate date based on style. The effort culminated in the 1950 publication of "A Study of Classic Maya Sculpture," which won critical acclaim and affirmed her as a master of Maya art and iconography.

Tania spent the first half of the 1950s working at Mayapán, CIW's last project. In 1955, CIW decided to phase out its archaeology department. Tania literally packed her desk and walked down the street to the Peabody Museum, where she became a research associate. She was now free to set her own agenda and immediately turned to a study of Maya glyphs, something that had fascinated her for years.

When writing the text for "An Album of Maya Architecture" nine years earlier, she conjectured that the glyphs on the Copán Hieroglyphic Stairway "... may reflect the history of Copán and the exploits of its rulers." She focused on the inscriptions from Piedras Negras and found certain glyphs repeated themselves from monument to monument. She determined the glyphs stood for birth and death, the names of the rulers, parentage information, the capture of enemies, and other aspects of Maya rulers' lives. In short, as she had deduced years earlier, the monuments represented the history of Piedras Negras.

At the time J. Eric Thompson was the dean of Maya researchers. He believed the inscriptions dealt solely with priestly matters. Before publishing her findings, Tania sent a letter to Thompson detailing her theories. He replied, "Theories are made to be upset, and if you can, or should I say, have cracked the problem, it will be a huge stride forward." Encouraged, Proskouriakoff published her paper "Historical Implications of a Pattern of Dates

at Piedras Negras, Guatemala" in 1960.

In 1989 David Stuart wrote in *Scientific American*; "... Tatiana provided another turning



The Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copán (TP).



Tania's stylistic renderings of the ballcourt at Copán and the main Acropolis at Tikal.



point in the investigation of Maya writing. Proskouriakoff, who had entered Maya studies as an architect, was charting changes in Maya artistic styles. That work called for precise notation of the dates on monuments as a means of dating stylistic phases. The unexpected result was that the pattern of dates on the monuments corresponded to periods in the span of individual human lives. Using inscriptions from Piedras Negras in Guatemala as a case study, Proskouriakoff demonstrated convincingly that the recorded dates marked historical events in the lives of named rulers and their families."

Her work helped provide the basis for Stuart's breakthrough publication, "Ten Phonetic Syllables" (1987), ushering in the now-accepted methodology of Maya hieroglyphic decipherment.

Never idle, Tania's next project was preservation of a collection of jade artifacts dredged from the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichén Itzá that had been in the Peabody warehouse for seventy years. Tania devoted fifteen years to cleaning the jades and reuniting broken pieces, testing the limits of her knowledge of iconography. Try to imagine the enormity of the task. The results of these labors were published in the catalog entitled "Jades from the Cenote of Sacrifice" (1974).

Tania's final project was a review of historical material in classic Maya inscriptions entitled "Maya History" (published posthumously in 1993). Her health was in decline as this final work wound to its close. She died on August 30, 1985 as she succumbed to Alzheimer's; a singularly tragic end for such a brilliant mind.

Char Solomon, Tania's biographer, relates that in 1998, after waiting more than a decade for political tensions to ease along the Usumacinta River, it was only fitting that it was David Stuart who carried Tania's ashes to Piedras Negras, where they were interred at the summit of the Acropolis, the group of structures in Tania's



The Acropolis at Piedras Negras (TP).



Tania's grave marker at Piedras Negras.

first and perhaps most famous reconstruction drawing; the same one that launched her career. Copal was burned and smoke was blown into Tania's burial place. There was the call of a single bird as the loose dirt was patted down and covered by the piece of stucco floor.

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