



The author at Bonampak, mid-1990s.

Foreword

Stephen D. Houston

Most forewords take a few days to mull over, then to compose. I have been writing this one for close to forty years. Karl Taube entered my life in the fall of 1980. We had arrived at Yale to study with Michael Coe, having been overwhelmed by the elegant writing and breakthroughs of Mike's *The Maya Scribe and His World*. Here was order in complexity, pattern, and meaning too, a way to plunge into the imagery that had so besotted us. Our dumb luck was, of course, to be there at the right time. Even as undergraduates, reacting separately to this absorbing, complex interplay of art and writing, Karl and I felt some dim intuition that things were about to crack open. Those years promised everything. Discoveries awaited.

Karl was like no one I had ever met before. More driven, more experienced in all ways, brighter, less plodding, more impassioned, a greater talent at drawing, more distinguished in his intellectual pedigree, firmer in his opinions than my insecurity allowed—yes, and far better looking too. He had a thin frame and blondish, tousled hair, seemingly a California surfer who was not anything of the sort. Liked to collect glass, ejecta, agatized whale bone, and to shape odd, knobby bits of wood while slowly sipping on Jameson or some other drink I could not stomach. There was that immense, flashy concha belt which I later rescued after he left it at Bonampak, Mexico. No scholar of his quality lacks for intensity, and I remember his fiery eagerness to “get to work.” I found, somewhat disconcertingly, that my own private universe of obsession was shared by someone else—for me, over some months, even cracks on the sidewalk began to look like Maya glyphs. Karl's brilliance soon led to my own conclusion, that I had best not compete with him. The prudent course was to focus on something else, Maya writing, a subset of related evidence. With time, I learned a bit of wisdom, that collaboration rather than competition makes for a happier career. Find the brightest colleagues, work with them, let them help you. The effort is not always symmetrical, for how can it be in absolute terms? But Karl always taught me more than I offered him.

At Yale, we quickly learned too that giving a competent talk and plodding to a bulleted summary was a snore. Absolutely beneath contempt. We had to look hard, make novel claims, be bold and big, not, for God's sake, even begin to think of boring Michael Coe while he read or listened to our papers. A certain arrogance arose from believing our ambitions lay within reach. (A comparison, noted with Ivy League snark: we were told that, in *their* seminar papers, Mayanist students at *another* university mostly vied over page length.) And then the performance, usually once a semester: our work needed strong visuals, the talks given without notes, every word of it involving a pretended spontaneity. That this elevated standard was seldom met, other than by Karl, hardly mattered. A few years before were some of the brightest young stars in Mesoamerican archaeology, from David Joralemon to Peter Mathews, Mary Miller, Jeff Kowalski, Janet Berlo, and many others. Yale was unusual in another respect. The hard line between art history and anthropology, so important to some, George Kubler (another professor) among them, was honored mostly in the breach. We were allowed to ask about what things looked like and why. We could also probe what they might mean. I never saw the need for zealous border guards between the two fields. "Visual culture" was a perfectly adequate description for our own version of the DMZ. Yale, for all the drifting we did—ours were idiosyncratic journeys—managed to supply the necessary passports.

It is difficult to explain what that world was like, prior to the works assembled here. Despite lots of enthusiastic pronouncements, we could barely read much of Maya writing. For me, thinking on it now, the striking breakthroughs lay ahead. No one spoke of central figures in Maya imagery such as the Maize God until Karl came along; no one looking at imagery was versed in a Mayan language or in deep ethnography (Karl was), attentive to Central Mexican evidence (Karl certainly a partisan here), inclined to link Mesoamerica to its broadest reaches in the US Southwest (Karl again, through the very personal connection described in his introduction). Slowly, in the 1980s, it became acceptable to discuss imagery and ideas as motivating forces, if filed away under the banal Marxianism of a term like "ideology." This was a godsend. Epigraphers and iconographers could now be hired by anthropology departments. Art historians had it easier, but I never assumed I would get a job. I do not know how hopeful Karl was either. Again, by sheer good fortune, positions materialized in the late 1980s, for the Maya had become a "hot" topic. We could now be said to study the religious mystifications of the *hoi polloi*. I had also pitched myself as an archaeologist, but it took many field projects and the mapping of countless mounds for that to stick. At present, it is safe to say, Karl and I do not care at all about our categorizing and packaging by others.

How to bottle Karl's magic? Not possible: his visual recall and interpretive talents have no peer. But one can list the ingredients, from methods to the greater mystery of how his insights operate. First and foremost, the directive is always to know your evidence. Collect every possible scrap of visual data. Karl would never put it this way, but this is how we explore graphic variance. This element is like that one and not like others. Their immediate visual context matters. A few feel it wrong, simply wrong, to have so many components to a single image. Only one should be permitted. They miss utterly the reason for such displays and their marshalling of graph-by-graph comparisons. Then, of equal importance, Karl would sort out what that element shows. Is that paper or a plume? Are those jewels, against all expectation, actually a string of earspools? One of Karl's great influences as an undergraduate was the incomparable folklorist Alan Dundes. Karl's research is in no small

measure about figuring out which stories—"foundational" or "etiological myths," if you will—were displayed in the dense images and telling objects of ancient America. Who were their principals, the *dramatis personae*, and, above all, why were they so important as to be carved into stone and put on public exhibit in what must have been labor-intensive works? What parts of their cosmos were important to them (the maize, rain, the sun, the holders of knowledge, the energies of youth, the sapience of age), and how were they embodied and personified in beings who could be represented and supplicated?

And then there is the fact that ancient Mesoamericans did not sequester themselves in small hamlets. They talked to each other, over wide distances, shared explanations about why matters exist as they do, moved about, warred with each other in a form of grim but insistent communication. Often, exceedingly ancient ideas might pass with notable tenacity to generations that met the Spaniards and beyond, to the Yukatekos who befriended Karl in his youth. A hermetic approach sees the region purely in terms of localisms, the narrower the space and time the more trenchant the discussion. Yes, initially perhaps. But the astounding commonalities of this sprawling region demand respect and should factor into an accounting of what the patrons and artists wanted their images to mean.

These are examples of Karl's craft, even cognitive wiring, a gift for detecting coherent stories. Then there is what can only be understood as an affinity to worldly beauty, the layered metaphors that enrich Mesoamerican imagery and give, still, powerfully, that punch that makes us whirl for the love of it. Karl is earthy, likes a good laugh, an exuberant dance or frolic. He admires and delights in stunning objects; he understands emotion and experience. These capacities equipped him to find, for the first time, ancient Maya clowns, catching on that certain scenes were meant to be riotously funny, and, more ethereally, that rushing clouds, ripe with rain, could be understood as feathered serpents showering us all with their westbound blessings. Karl discovered that objects pleasing to touch and rub, like jade, carried spirits within. He discerned a paradise full of flowery scent, buzzing bees, a flutter of birds, in the here, now, everywhere, in the impossibly distant past, in the future too.

It is at this level that Karl's work acquires majestic sweep. Curiously, it is also at its most human. His writing has gone to that place beyond academic debate, beyond the dry armature of citations and intro-middle-conclusion. It has taken us to a land where people laughed, loved, lived, died, and lived again. That is the place he visits, where he has invited us to travel in the wonder-filled essays that follow.