

ARCHAEOLOGY

Key to Mayan Writing Found In Long Forgotten Book

An Unknown Spaniard Wrote Booklet 300 Years Ago Giving Meaning of 40 Mayan Hieroglyphs

THE key to the hitherto undeciphered Mayan writing, America's greatest prehistoric mystery, was handed to science by Prof. William Gates of Johns Hopkins University.

The Rosetta stone of the Mayan hieroglyphs now revealed is a three hundred year old booklet by a forgotten Spaniard. In it are 40 Mayan signs translated into Spanish.

Now archaeologists expect to go to the famous unread Mayan stela or calendar monuments that dot Yucatan and other Central American areas, and begin more successfully to unravel their unread history. Dates and figure signs have been known in the past, but the writing has remained tantalizingly uncertain.

Among the 40 Mayan hieroglyphs identified by the Spaniard are:

Light, life, hunger, treasure.

The booklet, just published by the Maya Society, is by a Spaniard named R. Gomesta who lived at the end of the sixteenth century in Yucatan. A statement in Gomesta's own handwriting in his book declared that he possessed ancient Indian hieroglyphic books and that native friends had interpreted them for him.

The booklet vindicates Bishop Landa, sixteenth century Spanish prelate in Yucatan, of the charge of perpetrating a hoax, that some have held against him.

The Bishop gained his greatest historic moment when he ordered all the Mayan books gathered and burned in a great bonfire. Only three of these literary treasures escaped the flames, for modern science to study.

The suspected "hoax," which Landa left to posterity, was an alphabet of letters supposed to be a key to Mayan writing. The alphabet letters of Bishop Landa's key looked like Mayan script, but they seemed to have no meaning, and could not make readable the mysterious carvings on the stone monuments of Yucatan nor the three surviving Mayan books.

That the Bishop was not faking his

knowledge of Mayan writing is suggested by the discovery that Gomesta uses a few "letters" identical with those of Landa's "alphabet" and explains how to write with these "letters" the name of the Plumed Serpent god, Kukulcan. This would indicate that the style of writing recorded by the Bishop was actually in vogue among Mayan Indians of Yucatan in the days of the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century. It is possible that the Landa system was a degeneration of the old classical writing on carved monuments of the old Mayan cities.

The Gomesta manuscript explains another point moot among archaeologists. A certain Mayan god, whom scientists have merely lettered as "God B," for want of positive knowledge of his identity, is explained to be the great Itzamná, god of life, and not Kukulcan, the Birdsnake.

The document directs important facets of light upon many other points, and contains some bits of strange and curious lore. There is, for instance, a recipe for making ointment from gum and tiger-grease to put on women sacrificial victims destined for the Sacred Well of Chichen Itza, in Yucatan. This unction was to keep their bodies from swelling afterwards in the sacred waters.

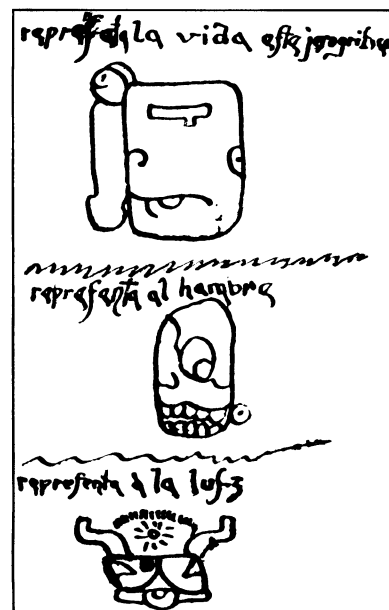
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BIOCHEMISTRY

Auxin, Promoting Growth Of Plants, is Synthesized

AUXIN, the inner secretion of plants that makes cells grow, has been produced synthetically at the California Institute of Technology (*Nature*, Jan. 19). The work was done by Drs. Kenneth V. Thimann and J. B. Koepfli, of the Institute faculty.

Drs. Thimann and Koepfli followed a "lead" provided by an earlier investigator, who had shown one of the active growth-promoting substances to be the same thing as the complex organic compound known as beta-indolyl acetic acid.



"ROSETTA STONE"

This page from a 300-year-old book by a forgotten Spaniard in Mexico promises to afford a key to the secrets of the ancient Mayan hieroglyphic writing.

They prepared this in the laboratory, and tested it on properly prepared young plants. The synthetic substance worked as well as the natural, causing both cell elongation and the growth of new roots.

Further evidence of the versatility of auxin, in promoting another kind of growth, was reported to *Nature* by two Oxford University botanists, Dr. R. Snow and B. LeFanu. They found that the same substance in leaf-extract that caused roots to grow also promoted marked growth in thickness of young stems by stimulating the cambium, or layer of growth-cells that ensheathes stems under the outer bark or skin.

The two Oxford botanists, however, cautiously record some question whether the cambium-promoter is identical with auxin. They are continuing their researches, with this question in mind.

There are three known kinds of auxin, according to Dr. F. W. Went of the California Institute of Technology. Auxins A and B are very much alike in chemical makeup; auxin C differs somewhat from them. But all three are active in promoting plant growth. Dr. Went, together with his father, Prof. F. A. F. C. Went of the University of Utrecht, Holland, was a pioneer in the study of auxin action.

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The working career of a horse is estimated at about 15 years.