

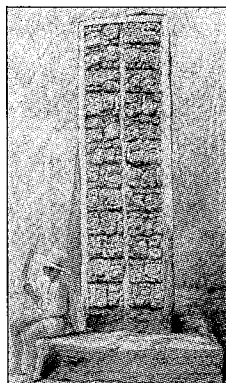
ience is perhaps unparalleled on the entire African continent. And without their angry history, one of the world's most admired men, Nelson Mandela, might be an unknown Xhosa shepherd tending his flocks today.

**BREAKING THE MAYA CODE.** By Michael D. Coe. *Thames and Hudson*. 304 pp. \$24.95

The story begins in 1519 with Hernan Cortéz looting treasures from the New World. Among the least prized items he sent back to Spain were codices with Mayan hieroglyphics, which simply lay for centuries in dusty vaults and libraries, unreadable and meaningless. In 1859, however, in Madrid, a lost 16th-century manuscript was uncovered in which a Jesuit priest had done the seemingly inconceivable, deciphering the hieroglyphs into an alphabet. Now comes the oddest part of the story: Nobody, for another century, used this "Rosetta stone" to decode the Mayas' ancient language

The reason for the long delay lies with the nascent "science" of anthropology, which, already by 1860 and for long after, was dominated by Darwinist assumptions. Expressing a nearly universal bias, Ignace Gelb wrote in *A Study of Writing* (1952) that the Maya were "suspended from the lowest branches of the evolutionary tree." New World peoples were considered too culturally underdeveloped to have created a writing system based on phonetics. The premier Maya scholar, Eric Thompson—Sir Eric, after being knighted by Queen Elizabeth—used the power of his position at the Carnegie Institution in Washington and the force of his personality to discredit anyone who dared suggest that Mayan hieroglyphics represented phonetic speech and not universal ideas and calendrical signs.

Yet during the 1950s a young Russian scholar who had never seen a Mayan ruin challenged the accepted view. Cut off from Thompson's influence by the enforced insular-



ity of Soviet society, Yuri Knorosov treated the hieroglyphs as an alphabet and began to decipher the language. (The glyphs, Knorosov showed, actually correspond more to syllables than to alphabetical letters.) It was not until Thompson's death in 1975, however, that Knorosov's work became generally accepted. Then the deciphering and translations began in earnest, and newspapers trumpeted the breakthrough. Today, we know the Mayas had a rich written history. Indeed, the same Jesuit priest in Mexico who originally deciphered the Mayan alphabet also staged an *auto da fé* in 1562, burning as native idolatry an entire library of Mayan books. We now know the names of Mayan cities and their kings. (Before 1960, the figures on Mayan stelae were assumed to be gods, not people.) We also know that theirs was far from the peaceful society that every Maya scholar (inferring from a lack of visible military structures) had once assumed.

Coe, a Yale anthropologist, personally knew most of the recent players in the saga of the code, both the old mandarins and the young turks. His recounting of an extremely technical story is both accessible and dramatic—an accomplishment almost as impressive as the breaking of the code itself.

#### Arts & Letters

**OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!** Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood. By Maria Tatar. *Princeton*. 295 pp. \$24.95

**FORBIDDEN JOURNEYS:** Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers. Ed. by Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher. *Univ. of Chicago*. 373 pp. \$27.50

Why do we tell fairy tales to our children? Once upon a time, that question had a simple answer: to lull the little dears to sweet sleep and innocent dreams. But for the past 16 years, since Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), fairy tales have seemed a darker, more ambiguous literature.

Bettelheim would take a traditional favorite, say "Hansel and Gretel," and reveal that it was quite *uninnocent*—that, in this case, it was a frightening tale of child abandonment. Bettelheim skipped over the misdeeds of Han-