

## IN MEMORIAM

### ROBERT J. SHARER, 1940–2012

#### Payson Sheets

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#### Robert J. Sharer: Maya Archaeologist Extraordinaire

Our world lost a towering scholar, dedicated fieldworker, and a fine friend when Bob Sharer passed away on September 20, 2012, at age 72. We all feel cheated out of another decade or two of Bob's time, but we will never forget what he did contribute during his life. His intellectual achievements were wide-ranging; from carefully looking after the details and having high standards of documentation in his excavations, to writing "the book" on the ancient Maya, aptly entitled *The Ancient Maya* (Figure 1).

Bob was born in Battle Creek, Michigan, on March 16, 1940, into an academic family. His father was director of the Evening College at Michigan State University. Bob completed majors in history and anthropology at that institution in 1961, having developed a primary interest in archaeology. A serendipitous convergence occurred when he was nominated for, and received, a Woodrow Wilson graduate fellowship at the same time that his father had invited Loren Eiseley, a University of Pennsylvania professor, to speak at Michigan State. Bob had to decide, on very short notice, where he would utilize the fellowship and, entranced with Eiseley, he chose Penn. Early in his graduate career at the

University of Pennsylvania he spent a summer excavating at Cornwall in the U.K. under Bernard Wailes, further solidifying his archaeological interests. He earned a Master's degree there in 1963, and then he served as an air photo interpreter in the United States Army from 1963 to 1965. Bob returned to graduate work at Penn, where a summer conducting ethnographic research in a highland Maya village fostered a life-long interest in the Maya.

Under his doctoral advisor, the late William Coe, Bob accepted the responsibility of describing the artifacts and architecture that Coe had excavated in El Salvador, earning his Ph.D. in 1968. His doctoral dissertation research was on the first of the three major Maya archaeological sites where he made major contributions to knowledge: Chalchuapa, in El Salvador. He directed multi-year research at the large site, and established a ceramic and culture-historical chronology that still stands today. His interpretations of ethnicities and external contacts have stimulated researchers for four decades. An early article on the prehistory of the southeastern Maya periphery was highly influential with his colleagues (Sharer 1974), and that was followed up with a three-volume publication on the site of Chalchuapa (Sharer 1978). Those volumes set a very high standard for publication of research results in the southern Maya realm. The details of excavations, architecture, artifacts, internal organization, scope of chronological coverage, and external influences and contacts have yet to be exceeded by any other project carried out in El Salvador.

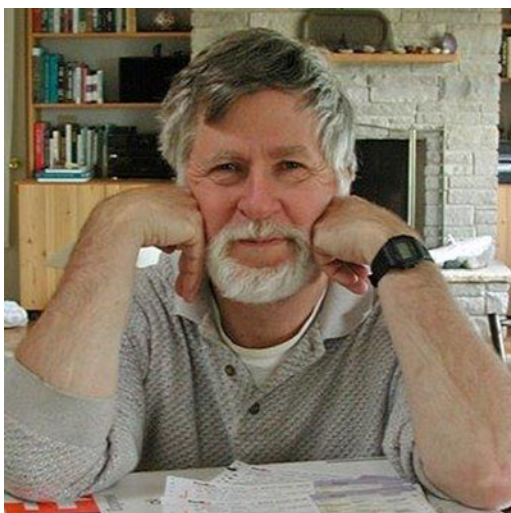


Figure 1. Bob (gleefully) preparing to ship the final version of the *The Ancient Maya* 6th edition to Stanford University Press in 2005. Photo courtesy of Loa Traxler.



Figure 2. Bob in his office at the University of Pennsylvania Museum in 1977. Photo courtesy of Loa Traxler.



Figure 3. Bob excavating the Hunal tomb at Copan. Photo courtesy of Loa Traxler.

His first teaching position, from 1967 to 1972, was at Pitzer College, one of the Claremont Colleges in southern California. After Linton Satterthwaite retired from Penn in 1972, Bob was appointed Assistant Professor in Penn's Department of Anthropology, and Assistant Curator in the American Section in the Penn Museum. Both titles shifted to Associate when he was promoted in 1975 (Figure 2). He was further promoted to full Professor and Curator in 1984, and occupied the Sally and Alvin V. Shoemaker Professor in Anthropology endowed chair beginning in 1995.

Bob directed a major research project at the Classic period Maya city of Quirigua, in Guatemala, from 1974 through 1979. Quirigua was known for its exceptionally tall stelae and elaborate "altars" and virtually nothing was known about its architecture before Bob and his colleagues arrived there. The extent and nature of the elite architecture were unknown, and little was known about when it was occupied, other than some time during the Classic period. His project defined the site spatially and chronologically, and refined the dynastic succession of the kings. Importantly, an archaeological survey was conducted in an approximate radius of 10 km around the site, discovering rural agricultural residents who lived very differently from the Maya elite in their acropolis. Bob encountered dramatic evidence of Quirigua's king, K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yopaat (or Cauac Sky), capturing Copan's king, Uaxaclajuun Ub'aah K'awiil (or 18 Rabbit), in A.D. 737, dispensing with him and, in so doing, establishing their independence from the former domination by Copan. Bob and his colleagues promptly and amply published the results of their research in a series of "Quirigua Reports," modeled after the highly successful "Tikal Reports" series.

Another fortunate turn of events that had unanticipated consequences began in 1975. Gordon Willey of Harvard University had taken on the responsibility of directing research at Copan, south of Quirigua, in Honduras, and he asked Bob to help develop general plans of research for Copan. Bob's innovative mind came up with quite a few suggestions, including that trenching be avoided in excavations in the Copan acropolis. Bob suggested that careful tunneling be done, an archaeological version of arthroscopic surgery, to avoid dismantling structures to explore deeper, antecedent buildings. Over a decade later, William Fash succeeded Gordon Willey as director of the Copan project, and he invited Bob to excavate those exact tunnels he had suggested earlier to Willey. Bob excavated many kilometers of tunnels through construction fill, leaving finished

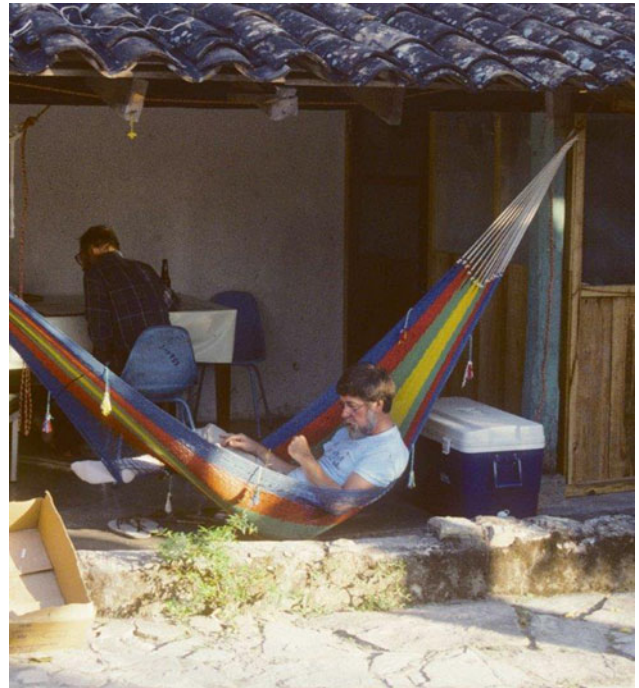


Figure 4. Bob reading in a hammock in his house at Copan. Photo courtesy of Loa Traxler.

buildings intact, and making spectacular discoveries (Figure 3). Certainly the "crown jewel" of his excavations was encountering the temple of Copan's founder K'inich Yax Kuk Mo, with his tomb located directly below it. He went on to discover the founder's wife's tomb, and also later constructions honoring both of them, as dynastic succession continued in subsequent centuries. He presented the research results in a co-edited volume entitled *Understanding Early Classic Copan*—a book that is an essential on the bookshelf of all Mayanists (Bell et al. 2004).

By far Bob's best known publication is *The Ancient Maya*. This compendium of knowledge about Maya archaeology was initially penned by Sylvanus Morley in 1946, and revised by George Brainerd a decade later. It went through various editions and by the fifth, which was published in 1994, Bob had extensively revised the book to bring it up-to-date. With the assistance of his wife, Loa Traxler, he published the sixth edition in 2006 (Sharer and Traxler 2006). There is no other more essential volume for Mayanists than this one.

One stands in awe of a life well lived (Figure 4). Bob trained many students in the field, the classroom, and the laboratory. He educated us all about the ancient Maya. We miss him greatly, as he cannot be replaced.

## REFERENCES

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