

# Send Me Mr. Burkitt...Some Whisky and Wine!

## Early Archaeology in Central America

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At the end of the last century, the pre-Columbian ruins of Mexico and Guatemala attracted adventurers and archaeologists whose names are known to every modern student of the Maya. Maler . . . Morley . . . Maudslay . . . Thompson . . . these men helped write some of the most important chapters in Mesoamerican archaeology. Yet there were others, men whose exploits are almost forgotten, whose contributions are often neglected, who also deserve a place in the Maya sun.

Among the most eccentric of this group of lesser known figures was Robert Burkitt (Fig. 1). Mathematician, self-taught linguist, and advocate of phonetic spelling, Burkitt roamed the Pacific highlands and the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala for half a century, exploring, buying and excavating on behalf of The University Museum for most of that time. Some of the finest Maya objects acquired during the Museum's early years stem from his activities. Yet Burkitt always felt that archaeology was merely a hobby, a distraction from time that should be devoted to his primary work: cataloguing Maya



1 Photograph of Robert Burkitt taken 1891, in Cambridge, Mass., probably to mark his graduation from Harvard.

languages and creating a Maya grammar. Ironically, only fragments of that linguistic research survive; the magnificent artifacts sent back to Philadelphia over the course of

of seven children of the Reverend Thomas Henry Burkitt and his wife, Emma Eliza. The ministry provided a precarious livelihood and, at fourteen, Robert was sent to live with an aunt and uncle in Nova Scotia, to obtain an education not possible at home. Family letters and the recollections of friends reveal him even then to have been fiercely independent, determined to make his fortune in the Canadian Northwest, or perhaps in distant Tasmania. At Dalhousie College in Halifax, where he took honors in mathematics, his poverty and his pride, coupled with a natural penchant for solitude, contributed to his reputation as a hermit.

### Cambridge and Copan

From Dalhousie, he went to Harvard to study mining, and spent many of his leisure hours with a small group of other young displaced Canadians. He struck up a friendship with one among them, a young student named George Byron Gordon (Fig. 2).

several decades provide his lasting memorial.

Robert James Burkitt was born on January 18, 1869, in Athenry, County Galway, Ireland, the oldest

The two had shared interests; in addition to their common Canadian background, both were engineers, accomplished draftsmen and good artists. After graduation in 1891,

Gordon went off to Central America, while Burkitt found work with the Boston Board of Survey. It was hardly the adventurous life he had envisioned for himself, yet he stayed with it for almost three years. One can imagine the enthusiasm with which he greeted Gordon's suggestion that he go to Honduras to excavate the Maya ruin of Copan!

Harvard's Peabody Museum had supported three previous seasons at Copan. Gordon had been second in command when John Owens, the young Director of the Third Copan Expedition, died of fever on February 23, 1892. Gordon took charge of the expedition, and concluded its business in such exemplary fashion that when the Fourth Copan Expedition was organized in 1894, he was named its Director. It was at that juncture that he extended the invitation that would change Burkitt's life.

On December 3, 1894, Burkitt was appointed Chief Assistant to the Director for the season of 1894-95, "with the understanding that all my expenses are to be paid, from the time of my leaving Cambridge until the return of the expedition in April or May, 1895, and that I am to receive also a salary of twenty-five dollars a month during the time specified above." Not until January was Gordon able to complete preliminary arrangements, and notify his employers, "If you are ready to continue operations I advise that you send me Mr. Burkitt, some moulding paper, photographic equipment, some whisky and wine, stationery and burlap."

To travel from Boston to Honduras was no simple feat in 1895. The first leg of the journey was by train to New Orleans, and from there by steamer to the port of Livingston in Guatemala. It was

snowing as Burkitt sailed from New Orleans in early February. Shipboard accommodations were poor, staterooms were small and smelly, the drinking water tasted of kerosene, and the weather continued rough all the way to Guatemala.

At Livingston, Burkitt transferred to a small river boat for the trip up the Rio Dulce to Yzabal, a journey of breathtaking beauty. Little has changed on the river since then. On either side of the wide, gentle current, the hills rise heavy with the dark green of tropical foliage. Brilliantly colored birds call from the trees, flash close to the water, then soar high above. The ruins of an old Spanish fort stand just at the point where the river is born. Once beyond, the

into the iridescence and languor of the tropics, it must have seemed the embodiment of every dream.

From the town of Yzabal, the trip was overland by mule and foot to the site of Copan, in Honduras. Once there, between bouts of fever, Burkitt joined Gordon in excavating the magnificent Classic Maya site. He dug trenches, unearthed artifacts, learned the nuances of photography, and mastered the technique of taking mold impressions of ancient stone monuments. Neither Burkitt nor Gordon had had any formal training in archaeology; Gordon had learned how to excavate from John Owens, and now he taught Burkitt. Their season lasted a scant five months, but it was long enough for the

country and the way of life to captivate the apprentice archaeologist completely. At the end of June, when Gordon returned to Cambridge, Burkitt chose to remain in Central America.

### Central America at the Turn of the Century

Guatemala in the 1890s was a land rich with promise. A number of North Americans had come to Guatemala after the Civil War to start a new life. Europeans heard of new opportunities, and they too came to stay. Heinrich Dieseldorf arrived in Cobán in 1865 and created a prosperous trading and importing business; other Germans came, followed by the English, Swiss and French. The influx of foreigners was seen as economically beneficial for the country, and encouraged by the government.

In 1877, Justo Rufino Barrios, the dictator of Guatemala, abolished communal land ownership by the Indians. In 1880, he abrogated Indian land titles, whereupon vast areas of land for-



2 George Byron Gordon, in 1891.



3  
 Photograph of the stables at Sepacuité, taken by Robert Burkitt in 1919, from the hill on which his guest house stood. His early notebooks were in boxes in one of the storage areas of the building, where they were recovered by the author in December, 1979.



4  
 The Ratinlixul vase, excavated by Robert Burkitt in 1923, at the site of Chihuahual. "One of the pots, however, is really a prize pot: the pot complete: the colours in the main still bright: and the picture most interesting. The picture, which is a single picture, shows a procession of people all round the pot, a procession of eight people and a dog." (From his letter dated August 24, 1923.)

merly controlled by Indian towns were made available to the planters. The lands of the Alta Verapaz and the Pacific slopes were well suited to coffee cultivation; new mines exploited the mineral riches of the Alta Verapaz. The disenfranchised Indians provided the labor. Coffee plantations and commercial trading centers multiplied. The country bustled with new enterprise, and greater economic expansion was forecast. The lure of land and fortune brought adventurers, misfits and idealists, who carved huge *fincas* (plantations) out of the forests and developed their own, idiosyncratic society. In such circumstances, a mining engineer with a talent for languages and a knowledge of archaeology could dream of creating his own small fiefdom.

When he first came to Guatemala as Gordon's assistant, Burkitt met the small colony of foreign planters who lived near the small village of Senahu north of Lake Izabal. All the settlers in the region would converge on the town of Yzabal to meet the infrequent supply boat. Thus, each journey Burkitt made to Yzabal for supplies included an evening of genial company with people unlike any he had known in Boston. These settlers had endured hardships, had tested themselves against disease and natural disasters, and knew their own resources. They accepted eccentricity in themselves and tolerated it in others. When the Peabody season ended and Gordon left, Burkitt moved in with an Irish planter named Curley. In those days, when plantations were several days' ride from each other, hospitality was extended to anyone coming in from the trail. Guests, expected or unexpected, would be granted a comfortable bed, good food, and pleasant company for as long as they wished to stay. Burkitt's visit with Curley lasted for several years, until one day his exasperated host informed him, "Burkitt, your visit is over."

Undaunted, Burkitt packed his saddlebags and rode to Sepacuité, a finca owned jointly by an English couple named Owen, and Kensett and Walter Champney, two young

coast, I was constantly invited to visit ruins, but I didn't at that time profess any interest in ruins. — The most noted ruins, in that direction, that I've heard of, are those of Cotzumalguapa. I don't know what the nature of them may be, or how much they've been investigated. I dare say you know about them. — The notion often crosses my mind; instead of groping about for places to dig, what a thing it would be for museums if they could begin by having a general antiquarian survey of the country. Have a force of young chaps go about and see all the ruins they could hear of; and note their situation and character, and make drawings of the more

5  
 Letter from Robert Burkitt to George Byron Gordon, dated September 28, 1916, in which he suggests a regional study of the archaeological sites, an unusually advanced approach at that time.

cousins from New England. He rode up in time for tea; on hearing of his plight, Mrs. Owen invited him to stay at least the night. Naturally, the visit was prolonged. Burkitt's skills were of occasional service on the finca; furthermore, he had great charm, humor, and conversational talents when he chose to exercise them. Weeks passed into months, and he showed no sign of leaving. He and Kensett Champney became great friends. Although he would disappear for

weeks or months, Burkitt always returned to take up residence once again. Finally, the Owens and the Champneys accepted the inevitable; a guest house was built for his use, and Sepacuité became his only permanent home in the Alta Verapaz (Fig. 3). Years later, when the Owen family sold their interest in the finca to Kensett Champney, it was understood that "Burkitt goes with Sepacuité."

During those early years, Burkitt worked as a surveyor, served as

"He had many friends among the Kekchi-speaking Maya"

foreman on a coffee plantation, owned an interest in several mining companies, bought his own small finca, and tried his hand at trading. Always, he wandered the highlands, visiting Indian villages, learning the languages and customs of the different Maya groups, exploring overgrown ruins, and behaving at all times in a manner most singular. Perhaps it was as early as 1896 that he began to wear the costume from which he never deviated in later life: high soft boots, khaki pants, Indian cotton shirt, and a cotton bag slung over his shoulder. These clothes, which looked like nothing more than the simple garb of the Ladino, were made to his measure. Burkitt owned a jacket, which he carried but never wore, just as he never wore a tie, even when calling on the finca owners and their families. The urge to decorum ran high, however, particularly among some of the English planters. One diminutive British lady stopped him at her front door with a firm, "You can't come in this house unless you're properly attired, Mr. Burkitt." He solved the problem by tying the two strings that hung from his collarless shirt in an approximation of a string tie. His hair, always thin, had become quite sparse, and he took to shaving his head.

### Linguistic Endeavors

He had many friends among the Kekchi-speaking Maya who lived in the Alta Verapaz. They rode with him, showed him ancient burial caves, explored with him the ancient sites, and patiently answered his endless questions about their language. He prided himself on having learned their language better than any other foreigner, and would spend weeks on the trail to verify the precise meaning of a phrase or the pronunciation of a

word as used in some remote village. Once sure of its meaning, he would return to Sepacuité, and pick up a weeks-old conversation with his friends as if no more than five minutes had elapsed. In 1901, he sent an article on the Kekchi language to Charles Bowditch at Harvard, and asked that Bowditch seek the proper means of publication:

"I have given several years to the observation of Kekchi; and may think, without presumption, that I have gained a more precise knowledge of it than any other traveller . . . I meant to write a grammar. In doing that, I found it necessary to compile a dictionary . . . I have not consulted the statements of other writers. The only book on Kekchi that I have seen, or heard of, is one published in Zurich, 1896, by a Dr. Stoll, and he must have been ignorant of the language. His book is brief, and blind, and packed with blunders, alike in sounds, grammar, and meanings."

Bowditch sent Burkitt's "Notes on the Kekchi Language" to Franz Boas, who considered it a valuable contribution by an author 'with a remarkably good ear' and published it in the *American Anthropologist*, with certain editorial changes that incensed the author. Always quick to take offense when he felt his scholarship, or his honor, had been slighted, Burkitt never forgot and never forgave. Two years after publication, his sense of outrage still fresh, he recounted Boas's insult in a long letter to Bowditch. He included a detailed explanation of the Maya mathematics contained in his article and showed why the 'correction' of his manuscript had muddled the whole thing, and suggested that the editor should have consulted 'any primer of algebra' before presuming to correct the manuscript. Nonetheless, Burkitt continued to publish in the *American Anthropologist*.

Despite Burkitt's obviously prickly nature, Bowditch considered hiring him to work for the Peabody as an explorer, and sought George Byron Gordon's evaluation of his old friend and assistant. For reasons still not clear, Gordon replied that Burkitt would make a success studying Indian languages, but he would not do as an explorer



and excavator! This comment in 1901 is especially strange in light of his subsequent courting of Burkitt to engage in just such activity.

### **Burkitt and The University Museum**

Gordon's career had taken him from Central America to a teaching position at Harvard. In 1903 he came to the Free Museum of Science and Art (later renamed The University Museum) as assistant curator, and was appointed Curator of American Archaeology in 1904, and Director in 1910. During those years, Burkitt and Gordon kept up a sporadic correspondence. Apparently, Gordon's opinion of his friend's talents had changed; beginning in 1905 he and Burkitt engaged in discussions that finally, in 1912, led to an agreement whereby Burkitt would spend part of each year exploring and acquiring antiquities for the Museum for \$100 a month plus expenses. By this time, Burkitt had had three articles pub-

lished, and had acquired some small reputation as an antiquary. He and Gordon had discussed his linguistic work as well as his potential archaeological contribution, and he no doubt felt that Gordon would edit any articles submitted for the Museum Journal less cavalierly than the distinguished editor of *American Anthropologist*. Burkitt's spelling, always slightly individual, had taken on the idiosyncratic style that would plague typesetters for twenty years. In an unpublished note which accompanied a myth sent to Gordon, he explained,

"My spelling ov the English, ov course I dont care about. When Mr. Roosevelt and people wer talking about spelling reform, I undertook to uze a reformed spelling for a certain time, and it now costs me an effort to go back to common spelling. But ther ar two small points in my spelling, that I think might be adhered to. They hav a bearing on the Indian. One point iz my spelling for example ov wood pecker. You wil see in the tale, that

6, 7

*Photographs of Robert Burkitt in Guatemala are rare, and reveal nothing. The photograph on the left was taken by J. Alden Mason at Pantaleón, Guatemala, in 1930, and captioned by him: Robert Burkitt among swarm of locusts. Unfortunately, in Fig. 7, Burkitt is silhouetted against the bright sky.*

I hav speld Wood pecker az two words: though printers, I dare say, would mostly make it one. And in a quantity ov other combinations—in stead, an other, some times, son in law, and so on—in stead ov joining the words ov the combination, I hav left them separat. That iz one point. The other iz something ov an oppozit nature. I ofen rite dont, and cant, and so on. If you like, turn them into do not, can not, and so on. But if you print them az I rite, then dont print them, don't, so, and can't, so. Dont split the words with a hook. That iz the other point."

Burkitt's first major work for the Museum took him to the Cuchumatanes Mountains in northwestern Guatemala, just above the Chixoy River, where he knew of collections of pottery vases, figurines, tablets, whistles, and water jars, which he purchased from the finca owners in the area, and recorded whatever information they could give about provenience. What he could not buy, he photographed, and sent negatives and prints to the Museum. These photographs are in many cases the only record of early collections long since dismantled and sold piecemeal.

During the course of the next few years Burkitt excavated at dozens of sites in the Alta Verapaz and the Pacific highlands, explored and made careful maps of remote areas, and documented the objects he collected for shipment to Philadelphia. His field notes, sent to the Museum in the form of long, detailed letters, reveal the development of Burkitt the archaeologist. His first major excavation for the Museum was at the site of Chama, in the Alta Verapaz, in 1916. When he excavated the first mound, he did not record the depth at which



"His . . . reports of archaeological activities never failed to include fascinating bits of information on Maya folklore, ritual, crafts, and myths."

items were found. By the time he began excavating the second mound, he had learned to be more careful, and to note proveniences by gridding the site and marking it off in cubic meters. He was also careful to wash and examine all fragments. His letters reveal that he had a certain interest in understanding the architectural nature of the structures he excavated.

Burkitt's travels for the Museum were frequently delayed and his itinerary subject to change due to unstable politics and natural disasters. Revolutions and armed insurrections were occasional additions to the ordinary problems of yellow fever, torrential rains, danger of arrest at the hands of overly eager provincial officers, and raids from across the Mexican border. He became expert at devising techniques to circumvent such obstacles. After the earthquake of 1918, soldiers were everywhere, rounding up the Indians

and impressing them into the Militia; Burkitt resorted to whiskey as a bribe to keep his laborers from being taken off.

Despite these vicissitudes, Burkitt was able to amass a large collection for the Museum. Before anything could be shipped, however, the first World War broke out, making shipment via normal channels even more difficult than it already was. The shifting political situation in Guatemala only exacerbated the situation. Not until 1920 was he finally able to ship a collection that had grown to 30 crates of material. In addition to archaeological objects, he sent a model of a Maya house, with explicit instructions on how a full size house should be erected, and a loom, with instructions on weaving. His long, detailed reports of archaeological activities never failed to include fascinating bits of information on Maya folklore, ritual, crafts, and myths (Fig. 4).

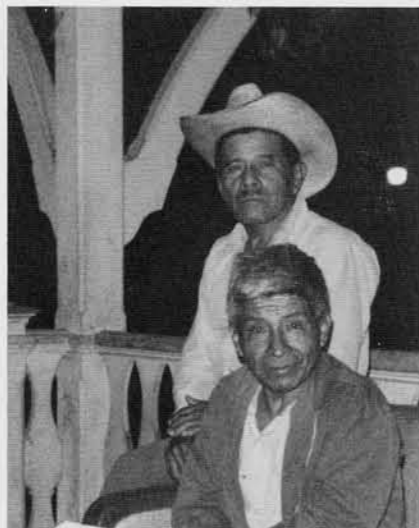
### **Burkitt's Approach to Archaeology**

It is interesting to note that although his work for the Museum required that he concentrate on acquiring objects for display, Burkitt believed that archaeological exploration should be regional in scope. In a letter to Gordon, dated July 14, 1905, he suggested: "The Alta Verapaz iz sprinkled with Indian ruins and remains; but in my opinion they should be explored not az individuals but az a hole, or at least in groups." And on September 28, 1916: "The notion often crosses my mind, in stead ov groping about for places to dig, what a thing it would be for museums if they could begin by having a general antiquarian survey ov the country. Hav a force ov young chaps go about and see all the ruins they could hear ov; and note their situation and character, and make drawings ov the more striking. I supoze its too big a scheme" (Fig. 5). But he was also pragmatic, and understood what it was that interested Gordon. "In a bizness way I sopoze what you would like perhaps at once would be portable 'finds' ov some sort to make a showing with', and several

years later he would write, "I've never been quite clear in my mind whether you attach more importance to the study of ruins or to getting things that you can carry away."

As the years passed, Burkitt's life centered completely in Guatemala. As early as his Harvard days, Burkitt had been attracted to Catholicism; his conversion to that faith no doubt contributed to a growing estrangement from his family. Eventually, he ceased all correspondence with them. Gordon was his only contact with a time before Guatemala. His closest friends were Kensett Champney, and Henry Kummerfeldt, manager of the finca Chocóla, which became his headquarters in the Pacific highlands. His arrival there in 1918 echoed the manner of his coming to Sepacuité years before. He rode into the finca one afternoon in time for tea; Kummerfeldt invited him to stay the night, and his first visit lasted for two years. Despite his penchant for unexpected arrivals and unannounced departures, his brusque manner and bristly pride, Burkitt was a warm and loyal companion to those few he chose as friends. He was "Uncle" Robert to the Champney children, and never forgot a birthday or an anniversary.

Besides residence at Chocóla and Sepacuité, Burkitt kept a room in



9 Mateo Kok Ca'al and Sebastian Kukul Kok, workmen at Sepacuité, who were ordered to burn Burkitt's furniture, clothing, and papers after his death.

Guatemala City for those occasions when business required his presence there. It was rented in the name of Brown, so that he might be spared the importunities of acquaintances and strangers. He had gained quite a reputation as a 'character,' which he rather enjoyed. If greeted as 'Burkitt,' he was likely to growl "The name's Brown," turn on his heel and cross the street. In general, he considered other linguists, photographers, mapmakers,

and archaeologists not as skillful, nor as painstaking, nor as accurate as he. On hearing of an American living in a Kekchi village who was reputed to speak 'like a native,' Burkitt went riding off to investigate. He returned after a few days, thoroughly pleased with himself, and told his friend Kummerfeldt, "That fellow learned through a dictionary—and a bad one at that. You couldn't understand a word he said." His laughter was rich with satisfaction.

The rhythm of Burkitt's life changed without warning when, on January 29, 1927, George Byron Gordon died suddenly as the result of a fall. The Museum secretary, Jane McHugh, sent the news to Burkitt. "He had a deep affection for you and there were no letters or reports that came to the Museum that gave him more pleasure than those that came from you." Burkitt's reply, for all his customary reticence, is clearly marked by emotion. ". . . I needn't speak of Mr. Gordon's death. It was a shock to me. We had been friends from old times. And he was the only old time friend in North America with whom I still corresponded."

It was the end of an era at the Museum. It also marked a turning point in Burkitt's relationship with the institution. Although he continued to excavate, his testiness had increased with the years, and misunderstandings were frequent. When the Museum sent J. Alden Mason to Guatemala to negotiate a contract to excavate the Maya site of Piedras Negras, Burkitt was of great help. He knew everyone, in and out of government, and he understood the ways in which business was conducted in Guatemala. It took more than two months for the contracts to be arranged, and he and Mason spent a great deal of time together. They went up to Chocóla, to visit the finca and examine Burkitt's excavation, then down to the Pacific, to the site of Baúl, where they raised and photographed the underside of an interesting stela, and had a great deal of time to talk (Figs. 6, 7). Mason was able to report that Burkitt "is a queer fellow and has to be handled tactfully, but we got along very well."



8 A close-up of Burkitt's grave marker in the British Cemetery in Guatemala City.

Despite this cordial interlude, Burkitt's relationship with the Museum worsened. The Museum would not agree to his price for an article he had submitted; he took exception to the editing of two lengthy reports; the Museum questioned some of his expenses, and he considered this to be an insult to his honor. Each irritation was eventually smoothed over, but the incidents chipped away at the relationship, and in 1937, with a letter from the Museum, the arrangement was ended.

### Burkitt's Last Years

Burkitt was now almost seventy, and he had not yet finished his study of Maya languages. No one else had written a comprehensive grammar of Kekchi. With his usual assurance, he was convinced that his would be superb. Now he would put all his research into proper shape for publication. He retired to Sepacuité, owned by Benjamin Champney, the son of his old friend Kensett. The guest house built for him years before was still there, but his relationship with Benjamin was difficult.

Burkitt's routine was unvarying. At noon, he would take a sunbath, an activity that contributed to the general belief that he was more than a little mad. In the late afternoon, he would have his bath. He spurned the new plumbing and hot water that had been put in at Sepacuité, in favor of his habitual wash in cold water, carried by Indian boys eager to earn the two cents a pail he gave them each day. Guests who came to call were greeted on the veranda; no one was permitted to enter his quarters, where he kept notebooks he had filled over the years. Ranchhands could hear him murmuring as he read or worked, sometimes long into the night. Some of the Indians feared him, and called him 'brujo'; others accepted his strangeness and loved him, and would ride with him on his now infrequent trips to find new words, new meanings for his Kekchi grammar and dictionary.

Burkitt's health began to fail, and beginning in 1942, he made regular trips to Guatemala City, to see the doctor at the American Hospital.

His charm was still evident when he chose to use it, and at small dinner parties given by his doctor, he would regale the guests with stories of long-lost Maya sites, mountains he had climbed, and Indians he had known. At Sepacuité, though, he kept to himself. After a dispute with Benjamin Champney, he no longer took his meals in the big house. Instead, he paid one of the Indians to prepare and bring his meals to him. Then, at the end of January, 1945, he suffered a stroke. There was no way to care for him on the finca, so Champney strapped Burkitt onto his horse, and took him overland to the airstrip at La Tinta, a trip estimated to have taken ten hours. He was loaded onto the plane and flown to the American Hospital in Guatemala City. He never regained consciousness, and died two weeks later, on February 17, 1945. His friends the Kummerfeldts stayed with him to the end, and arranged for burial in the British Cemetery in the city (Fig. 8).

The papers he was working on are gone, burned, along with his

clothing, his books, and his furniture, when word of his death reached Sepacuité (Fig. 9). Only a few early notebooks survived, packed away in boxes in a storeroom at Sepacuité, with some old checkbooks, a report by a Harvard president, his graduation certificate from Dalhousie, a pencilled genealogy, and some family photographs. But the Archives of The University Museum has his lengthy letters and meticulous field notes, and the Mesoamerican gallery displays examples of his superb archaeological collecting: the polychrome vase from Ratinlixul, a carved metate from Cotzumalhuapa, the large fragment of pre-Classic carving from Chocóla. It is on these magnificent fruits of what he considered his 'hobby' that Burkitt's reputation securely rests. 21

Quotations in the body of the article are from letters in the Archives of The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania; the Archives of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University; letters and papers in the possession of the author, and personal communications.

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Elin Danien is Coordinator of Museum Events at The University Museum, and a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. She is photographed in the barns at Sepacuité, where she recovered Burkitt's early notebooks, packed away and long forgotten.