Maya Justice—The Rios Montt Trial

The darkest days of Guatemala’s 36-year civil war were the 17 months during which military dictator Efrain Rios Montt seized power. In 1982 and 1983 the Guatemalan army burned hundreds of Maya villages, brutally murdering, raping, and torturing men, women, and children in the name of “defeating communism”. When the peace accord was enacted in 1996, the United Nations studied the evidence and announced that at least 200,000 Guatemalans were killed during the conflict and that the targeting of entire Maya communities was a campaign of deliberate genocide against the population. Now, 18 years after that report, Rios Montt has finally been ordered to stand trial for his terrible deeds.

Rios Montt has been avoiding trial for years. In 1999 Guatemalan Nobel Peace Prize recipient Rigoberta Menchu was the first to present charges against him, but his team of lawyers blocked the process until 2007 when Rios Montt managed to win a seat in Guatemala’s Congress. As a member of Congress, he became immune to prosecution. But on January 14, 2012 that immunity ended when his term of office ran out and just 12 days later he was called before a Guatemalan tribunal who ruled that there is enough evidence to indict him for genocide and crimes against humanity. Then on March 1st a judge declined Rios Montt’s request for amnesty from the genocide charge and set his trial to begin later that same month.

Rios Montt has thus far declined to comment, but his defense team contends he did what had to be done to save the country against leftist guerillas and that he did not directly order the level of brutality exercised by the military. The thousands of Maya who stood outside of the courthouse holding up photos of their murdered family members disagree and cheered the news that he will now stand trial for at least 1771 deaths, 1445 rapes, and the displacement of nearly 30,000 Guatemalans during his time as “president”.

Former Dictator Efrain Rios Montt at his hearing on January 27, 2012
Letter from the Director

Happy Spring Equinox! May your day be well balanced between darkness and light. Here in Austin the wildflowers are in full bloom, reminding me that MEC’s busy summer is just around the corner. We are leading some special expeditions this year, a few to places we’ve never been. I’ll be personally leading our first trip to Panama for Midland College and Michael Grofe will lead a group into the Amazon in late May. Also in May, Christopher Powell will head up our community service trip to help the San Jose orphanage in Cuzco. You can read more about that mission and how you can help in this edition of ArchaeoMaya.

Our lead article this time is a bit more political than we usually prefer to be. However, the Rios Montt trial is so important to modern Maya people that it would have been wrong not to acknowledge it. If that trial goes as many predict it will, the Maya will truly have a new era to celebrate as the 13th Bak’tun completes in December.

We tried something different for our usual study abroad reports in this ArchaeoMaya. Instead of our account, we asked the organizing professors to share their impressions of the experience. They gave our courses shining reports and honored us with their words. Now as we look forward into the countdown to the 13th Bak’tun, we see a lot of unique opportunities for public outreach coming our way. MEC’s staff will be appearing in multiple documentaries related to the Maya Calendar this summer and fall. A particularly well done film by Wildheart Vision Productions entitled 2012: The Beginning is part of the Cannes Film Festival this year and features both myself and Michael Grofe. In addition, I’m on the road almost every month this year presenting my public lecture “2012 End of Days?: Misunderstanding the Maya Calendar”. Last but not least, we have two special journeys open to the general public timed to Summer Solstice and Zenith Passage in August. We will hope to see some of you on those trips so we can share our love of the Maya world with you first hand!

Yours Truly,
Pennsylvanian Students and Alumni in Belize

An account by organizing professor Dr. Isabelle Champlin

The 2012 Spring Break trip (March 3-March 10) was designed for anthropology and environmental studies majors. Our group of eight university professors, staff, alumni and students flew into Belize City and immediately headed westward into the low hills of the Cayo District to our thatched roof cabanas at Cahal Pech Village, perched on a steep hill overlooking the town of San Ignacio. This hotel is right across the road from the Maya site of Cahal Pech, one of the many small Maya sites that began in the Formative period, 1200 BC. Unlike the huge and famous sites, one can explore freely here, and there are long passageways, hidden chambers and sunken plazas.

It took a full day to visit Caracol, far off in the Maya Mountains along dirt roads slick with rain, through tropical pine forests. One of the "must see" cities of the ancient Maya, enormous Caracol was brooding and beautiful in the rain with brilliant pink and purple impatiens everywhere and howler monkeys roaring. The Caana or Sky Palace is the tallest building in Belize to this day. Annette Morales, a student lifeguard and campus Outdoor Activities coordinator, made a personal goal to run to the top of every structure at every site. She did it, but says "by the 4th structure I was pretty much crawling to the top." Dr. Morio Arimoto, an exercise physiologist from Japan, measured each riser height and depth of many of these staircases, for an energy efficiency study.

The Belize Zoo was delightful, clearly designed for visiting schoolchildren and appealing to a sense of adventurous discovery, with winding paths through thick foliage and bridges and platforms over ponds and exhibits. It had several stately jabiru storks, the largest birds in the Americas, bigger than condors, as well as other endangered wildlife such as harpy eagles, tapirs (mountain cows to Belizeans), and jaguars.

The last three days of our trip were spent on the tiny island of St. George's Caye, where we sailed and kayaked among anhingas (snakebirds to Belizeans) and brown pelicans, and visited a local aquarium. We snorkeled on an offshore reef, and student Abbie Arnold believes "snorkeling was like visiting a totally different world from our own: foreign, yet beautiful; an experience that everyone should try to have."

Some of us recommend not visiting on election weekend, when political rallies, with drumming and chanting, continue deep into the night, but others of our party found the process fascinating, different from ours but very similar in the desire for good roads, fair pay, and less corruption. Student Morgan Emery said that she was especially impressed "by how passionate the Belizean people are about their government. Hearing rallies until 2 a.m. and seeing young people lining the streets waiting for their voices to be heard was really inspiring".

We enjoyed Belize so much, we are planning on returning next year. It will our 10th annual trip with Maya Exploration Center. A brief look at each of our other "Maya Spring Break" travel courses with MEC, beginning in 2004, is at http://www.upb.pitt.edu/academics/archaeology.aspx
Wabash College’s Adventure in Chiapas

An account by organizing professor Dr. Rick Warner

Our weeklong trip to Chiapas as part of a class on Mayan Archaeoastronomy was transformational for students and faculty alike. With one of the field’s foremost experts, Alonso Mendez, we toured the classic sites of Palenque, Bonampak and Yaxchilan, as well as recently discovered and unworked sites back in the woods. Our students are a hearty bunch, so MEC has always led us on hikes into the wilderness, where other ethno-tourists rarely tread.

MEC had everything quite well organized, which is saying something for travel in Mexico in my experience. But what makes this experience stick out is the way that the "immersion" experience integrated so well with our course work back home. Students had seen many images of Mayan buildings, but as we entered the site at Palenque they all had that "OMG" moment. Then the MEC staff was able to push their learning to a new level, as the students learned of the intricacies of the buildings and their relationship to celestial bodies, precisely the core subject of our course.

In sum, the trip was as comfortable as it was intellectually stimulating. This is a good way to see another side of Mexico, with respect to its past traditions and complicated integration of these with present realities. Folks like us from the United States need to be placed in these situations more often, so that we can imagine how people in other times and places have forged their livings. We will be back.

Ancient Aliens Abduct the Maya

It was only a matter of time, but History Channel’s farcical series Ancient Aliens aired two shows on the Maya earlier this month. MEC’s director Ed Barnhart appeared as an expert in both episodes, but was given little air time as compared to the “ancient astronaut theorists” and Chariots of the Gods author Erich Von Daniken. Among the claims made during the shows were that the Maya gods are aliens, that the Maya calendar predicts the return of aliens to Earth, and of course that Pakal’s famous sarcophagus lid depicts a spaceship. We at MEC hope it goes without saying that we don’t believe any of that.

Some of you in our community may wonder why we would agree to be part of such a production. Our perspective is this - many, many people watch shows like Ancient Aliens looking for truth. If we don’t want them to get 100% false information, it’s our obligation to participate in the conversation. So, despite the editing, clipping, and even sentence splicing that our interviews sometimes receive we find it important to be a counter opinion in shows like this whenever we can. We hope that those of you who saw Dr. Barnhart on Ancient Aliens understand that and do not instead conclude that he agrees with the majority of the show’s ludicrous content.
Help MEC Support San Jose Orphanage in Cuzco

For a third time, MEC has a plan to support Hogar Transitorio de Niños San Jose in Cuzco and this time we would like your help. In May of this year MEC is organizing a community service project at the Hogar to be carried out by a group of students from Simpson College, Iowa. They will be assisting Sister Rosa and her small staff in the running of soup kitchens in remote Quechua villages and to provide lunches to over 400 homeless children in Cuzco. In addition to that ground work, Simpson College’s Professor Mark Freyberg is leading his students in a fund raiser to buy much needed supplies for the dozens of orphans in permanent residence at the Hogar. The facility is in constant need of funds to buy food, clothing and medicines for the children. Formula and special medicines for the infants in their care are especially expensive.

The Simpson College students will get a shopping list from the orphanage and spend a day purchasing supplies in Cuzco. But their campus fund raiser can acquire only so much, and obviously the more we can raise, the more we can give. So, we are asking you, MEC’s community, to contribute. You can donate through our website at www.mayaexploration.org/donate.php or by check to our address in Austin, Texas. All donations are tax deductible and each donor will receive a report on how the funds were used to support Hogar San Jose. Please consider joining our effort to improve the lives of Cuzco’s children and support the tireless efforts of the nuns at Hogar San Jose.

Maya Residential Burial Paper on MEC’s Website

This paper discusses the Classic Maya tradition of residential burial and its implications for settlement pattern archaeology. Based on evidence that multiple generation residential units and ancestor worship existed at all levels of society, a post-residential function for abandoned houses is suggested. Though a lineage may have abandoned a particular house, the structure remained the burial site of important family ancestors. As such, abandoned houses became the primary locations for depositing religiously mandated gravesite offerings. Presumably, offerings to the dead in classic times resemble modern day rituals recorded in recent times by ethnographers. While archaeologists have typically interpreted the presence of metates, ceramics, organic residues, and localized burning as evidence of residential activity, these same items are recorded by ethnographers as offerings in ancestor veneration rites among the modern day Maya. If we reexamine the archaeological record in terms of the ethnographic evidence, our understanding of settlement patterns and population estimates is transformed. In other words, the practice of post-residential veneration, and the archaeological evidence it leaves behind, can create the illusion of a much larger and more densely clustered settlement than actually existed.

To read the entire paper, click or cut and paste the link below:

Oldest Paintings in the World?
There are reports that the oldest cave paintings in the world have been found in Spain. Even more surprising – they may not have been made by humans. The images were found in the Caves of Nerja in Malaga, Spain and are thought to be crude depictions of seals. Charcoal found next to the stalagmites bearing the paintings was dated to between 42,300 and 43,500 years. That’s more than 10,000 years earlier than the now perhaps second oldest paintings found in Chauvent-Pont-d’Arc Cave in Southern France. At that early date, archaeologists say that Neanderthals, not Homo Sapiens, inhabited the area of the Caves of Nerja. If that is true, then these are not only the oldest known paintings, but the first known example of Neanderthal cave art. While all of this seems quite exciting, there’s one small problem. The paintings themselves have yet to be dated. The charcoal may or may not be contemporaneous with the paintings. Until the paint itself is C14 dated many archaeologists will refrain from embracing the find as fact.

Patolli Board Found in Campeche
During restorations of the central tower at the site of Dzibilnocac in the state of Campeche last month, INAH found the Mesoamerican board game “patolli” etched into a flat stone. The Maya version of the board is quincunx shaped with a set of blocks dividing spaces on the board. Some researches note the numbers 52 and 260 in patolli board formations, suggesting they may have also been related to the Maya calendar. While the Dzibilnocac patolli board is a fine example, its far from the first of its kind found in the Maya world. Patolli boards have been found in many sites, including Palenque, Yaxchilan, Tikal, and Piedras Negras.

MEC’s Archaeoastronomy Summer Tours

Summer Solstice in Chiapas and the Guatemalan Highlands
June 18 - 28, 2012
Led by Dr. Christopher Powell
Visit La Venta Park, Palenque, Bonampak, Yaxchilan, Tonina, Chamula, Izapa, Lake Atitlan, Iximche, and Guatemala’s National Anthropology Museum as Dr. Powell relates the latest research about ancient Maya astronomy.

Surfing the Zenith in the Maya World
Guatemala and Honduras
August 5 - 15, 2012
Led by Dr. Christopher Powell
Visit Kaminaljuyu, Siebal, Tikal, Lake Peten Itza, Quirigua, Copan, and Guatemala’s National Anthropology Museum as Dr. Powell leads a chase to follow the day of zenith passage south through the Maya ruins.

Chautauqua 2012 Courses
Inti Raymi in Peru – Cuzco and Machu Picchu – June 16-25, 2012
The Paraca Desert and the Nazca Lines in Peru - July 6-11, 2012
Zenith Passage in the Temples of Ancient Java - October 9-16, 2012
Visit Kaminaljuyu, Siebal, Tikal, Lake Peten Itza, Quirigua, Copan, and Guatemala’s National Anthropology Museum as Dr. Powell leads a chase to follow the day of zenith passage south through the Maya ruins.

www.ahautravel.com for all the details
Dave Hixson Joins MEC’s Team

Maya Exploration Center is proud to welcome the newest member of our team - Dr. David Hixson. His combination of field expertise, independent spirit, and philanthropic dedication makes him an perfect fit with MEC. Since his teenage years Dave has been working with the NGO Intercambia Cultural Maya and continues to be an active supporter of their public outreach programs in Yucatan. During his years working with the late Dr. Bruce Dahlin at the site of Chunchumil he not only conducted innovative field research, but gave back to the local community organizing free health clinics, public education seminars, and movie events for children. Having recently obtained his PhD from Tulane University, Dave is now looking for new ways to continue his research and community service in Yucatan. MEC intends to support him by developing new travel courses featuring his work, seeking grants to fund his ongoing research, and sharing our website as a venue through which to promote his community outreach projects.

Thanks to Everyone Who Donated to MEC This Winter
James Sievers

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