Ceibal’s Surprisingly Ancient Origins

University of Arizona archaeologist Takeshi Inomata has dug deeply underneath Ceibal’s Group A, penetrating layer after layer of occupation episodes. At the base of their wide excavation pit Inomata’s team uncovered a plaza with ceremonial architecture dating back to 1000 BC. With 54 carbon 14 samples collected and processed, that date is impressively secure and puts Ceibal’s origins a good 200 years before any other Maya city in the Peten. The nature of its architecture seems to support its age as well, being stylistically much more like its contemporaries along the Olmec influenced coast of Chiapas. Inomata does not immediately conclude Olmec influence at Ceibal, but instead proposes that this may be important evidence of co-evolution and the thought that perhaps the Maya were more than simply imitators of Olmec precedents.

Aside from the great antiquity of the finds at Ceibal, even more surprising is the evidence of early astronomy they contain. The structures around the early plaza are a single square platform mound looking east over a north-south aligned rectangular platform with three small structures on top. This is a common Maya complex called an E-Group, named as such for the first one identified in Uaxactun’s Group E by Blom in the 1920’s. Simply explained, the single structure is the observation point from which to watch the sun rise over the three smaller structures to identify solstices, equinoxes and probably zenith passages. There are dozens of E-groups in the Maya area, but the example at Ceibal pre-dates the previously earliest example (in Tikal’s Lost World complex) by 1000 years! It’s like finding a meter tape a millennium before you thought the metric system was invented.

This pushes not just our evidence of Maya astronomy back to 1000 BC, but with it the evidence of Maya religion. Before Inomata’s work, one of the strange things about Ceibal was its Central Mexican influenced resettlement in the Terminal Classic. Of all the other abandoned cities in the Peten, why Ceibal? It was neither as prominent nor as geographically advantageous than any other of the fallen capitals. Inomata’s find of its early origins and place in regional foundations may be part of the answer.
It’s been a relatively quiet spring for MEC, with few travel programs and our college partners still struggling underneath budgetary austerity measures. But in the Maya world, a lot has happened in the last few months. In this issue of ArchaeoMaya, you’ll read about some exciting new archaeological discoveries and some disturbing political developments.

This is perhaps the most politically charged edition of the ArchaeoMaya ever, as we update you on the injustices of the Rios Montt trial in Guatemala and Nohmul’s destruction in Belize. We at MEC hope not to draw down any negative attention from those countries, but we care about the Maya and don’t like to see their culture, past or present, under attack. On the lighter side, this edition will report on exciting new Pre-Classic finds at Ceibal and my own pet theories about what the archaeologists at Teotihuacan are overlooking. In our news from the field column, we report on yet another major Maya city in Campeche found by the indomitable Ivan Sprac.

My Great Courses series “Lost Worlds of South America” has been very well received, nothing but 5 star reviews in the first six months of release. As a result, I’m please to say that Teaching Company and I are now in negotiations to produce another series, this time a 48 lecture series on the cultures of Mesoamerica. The release date would be sometime in 2015.

I’m looking forward to this summer. In just a few weeks my lovely wife Cassandra and I will lead a UT Chautauqua course in Oaxaca. Then as I lead second Chautauqua course to Ecuador (another 1st for MEC), father and son team Alonso and Xun Mendez will be leading a group of Taiwanese students from our partner institution HASSE through the Yucatan. With any luck my now far behind schedule Tulum app will be ready by then and those students will be our first to use that innovative new resource.

I’m also looking forward to the fall. To celebrate the success of my Great Courses series “Lost Worlds of South America”, I’ll be leading a Spring Equinox journey to Machu Picchu, Pachacamac, and the Nazca Lines. In November, I’ll lead MEC’s first ever expedition from Palenque all the way to Copan. Then it’s back to the drawing board, planning out our new activities for 2014 like a trip to Angkor led by Michael Grofe and MEC’s first travel course to northern Peru.

As always, I want to conclude this letter by expressing my thanks to all who support MEC through your interest, donations, and program participation. We wouldn’t exist without you.

Sincerely,
Rios Montt Conviction Overturned

Efrain Rios Montt, Guatemala’s dictator during one of the darkest chapters of the country’s history, was convicted on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity on May 10, 2013. Rios Montt was a general in the Guatemalan army who seized power through a coup d’état on March 23, 1982 and immediately waged a terrifyingly brutal scorched earth war against the Maya people. He was held responsible for the massacre of 1771 Ixil Maya and sentenced to 80 years in prison. The five week trial heard over 100 witnesses recount their horror stories of death, dismemberment and rape. Tribunal President Madam Yassmin Barrios ordered that the prison sentence start immediately.

The survivors of the Maya genocide and the international human rights community celebrated the decision as the first time in Guatemalan history that a former leader had been convicted of his crimes. However, the celebration was to quickly revert back to protest when just ten days later on May 20th, the Guatemalan High Court threw out the conviction and ordered the trial’s proceedings to be annulled and repealed. The reason for the annulment was cited as the brief suspension of the trial on April 19th, when a judge who had been recused from the case in 2011 initiated a jurisdictional dispute. Rios Montt’s legal team seized upon the incident to denounce the trial as “illegal proceedings” and staged a walk out from the court. Based on that brief dispute, the high court put forth the legally unprecedented remedy of “rewinding” the trial to the date of the alleged judicial error. Hector Reyes, lawyer for the Center for Legal Action on Human Rights told Guatemala’s La Prensa that the overturning of the verdict took “an eminently illegal form, as the decision of the Constitutional Court lacks any foundation in law.” Nevertheless, Rios Montt is now back to his comfortable house arrest while a new set of judges who are willing to accept the death threat laden position of presiding over the next trial are sought. When and if it is rescheduled, all of those brave families who recounted their terrible stories of loss as testimony will have to do so all over again.

The overturning of the Rios Montt conviction is a sad sign that the reconciliation process in Guatemala still has a long way to go. Even in the now meaningless Rios Montt trial, his co-defendant and former Military Intelligence Chief Rodrigo Sanchez, was acquitted. Current Guatemalan President Otto Perez Molina, who was also a general in the early 1980’s, said he opposed Rios Montt back then but fell short of saying he supported his conviction. During the court proceedings witnesses testified that Perez himself oversaw the burning of villages and mass executions. Another elephant in the room is the US involvement during Rios Montt’s coup d’état. Ronald Regan made a personal visit to Guatemala to publically praise Rio Montt. Both the US military and the CIA supported what was then called a “counter insurgency effort”.

Guatemalan big business associations and President Perez himself say that the trials should be cancelled and that the only path to peace lies in forgetting and forgiving. But the people of Guatemala are not just going to forget or forgive the more than 200,000 murders and the displacement of over 1 million people during the state advocated persecution that went on not just during the early 1980’s but continued until 1996. The Maya of Guatemala crave peace, but the peace that comes from justice, not denial.
What’s been done about the destruction of the largest pyramid at Nohmul in northern Belize? In a word, nothing. It’s been six weeks since the announcement of its demolition for use as road fill and no action against the perpetrators has been taken. The situation illuminates a travesty far larger than the destruction of Nohmul – the Belizean authorities’ habitual disregard for their charge to protect national patrimony. All the facts have been in for weeks but it appears little or nothing will be done. The company who bulldozed the pyramid is D Mar’s Construction Company owned by Denny Grijalva, Orange Walk United Democratic Party Standard Bearer. The fill was extracted for D Mar’s government contract to repair rural roads. Government officials are careful to deny any involvement and released a statement that all those involved should be “prosecuted to the full extent of the law”. However, current Belizean law states the maximum fine for destroying national heritage is $5000USD. When a typical road work contract is hundreds of thousands of dollars, paying $5000 to grab a ready to use pile of rocks is cheaper than mining it from a proper quarry!

The Belizean Institute of Archaeology is outraged and disheartened, but that can they do? They have only the power to recommend prosecution, which they have done. As of his last press release, Director Dr. Jaime Awe had not even been given the name of the owner of the private land that Nohmul stood upon. Awe was quoted as saying: “When one sees the heritage of our country being purposely destroyed for no good reason and particularly when people like myself or the other archaeologists at NICH have spent our careers trying to protect and preserve this archaeological heritage, to see it destroyed like that it is like when the boxer throws in the towel at the ring”.

As any archaeologist who has worked in Belize can tell you, the Nohmul destruction brings to light a problem that has been epidemic for decades. From widespread looting, to road fill mining, to Mennonites plowing down mounds in fear of the evil spirits who dwell within them, thousands of ancient Maya structures have been destroyed in Belize without a second thought, or legal consequences. Even at Nohmul, reports of its use for road fill have been going on for 20 years. In fact, in 1998 the same exact situation came up - the Orange Walk United Democratic Party Standard Bearer at the time, Fred Martinez, was caught mining Nohmul for fill. Was he prosecuted? No! He was appointed Belize’s Ambassador to Guatemala, a position he retains to this day. If the Belizean government can’t stop turning a blind eye to the destruction of their country’s national patrimony, we can all brace ourselves for losing more Nohmuls in the future.
Teotihuacan’s Tunnel and Missing Clues

In 2003 a rainstorm at Teotihuacan revealed the opening of a tunnel underneath the Temple of Quetzalcoatl. Authorities stabilized the entrance, made an investigation plan, and slowly went about removing the rubble the tunnel had been filled with during ancient times. Then in the 2012 excavation season, a team led by INAH archaeologist Sergio Gomez Chavez encountered two open chambers off the sides of the tunnel, dubbed simply the North and South Chambers. The finds within the South Chamber made international news in May of 2013 when hundreds of yellow color clay spheres, 4 to 12 cm in diameter and once covered in pyrite, were found. The walls of the chamber were also covered in pyrite, magnetite and hematite, making it once a shiny metallic room filled with glittering golden orbs. A fantastic find, but one that archaeologists have no idea what to make of. Nothing like it has ever been found in Mesoamerica, though the quantity and dispersal pattern of the orbs seems to indicate that they were placed during multiple ritual offering episodes.

Excavations are now heading that direction and INAH archaeologists have theorized that there will be burial chambers containing the early rulers of Teotihuacan.

But there’s an important clue about this tunnel that has thus far been overlooked – its similarity to the cave found under the Pyramid of the Sun. That cave was found in the 1970’s, sealed back up, and then reopened in 2008. It’s a natural cave, not a tunnel, and it’s been theorized as the reason why the Pyramid of the Sun was placed where it is and by proxy perhaps the reason for the entire city’s location. The cave contained no burials, but many offerings thought to be associated with the structure’s approximate 100 BC dedication. The cave is a long tube with two chambers, north and south, mid-way along its course and terminating into four chambers spread out like the pedals on a flower. Its total length is about 100 meters, just like the man-made tunnel under the Temple of Quetzalcoatl. Between the identical length and the identical north-south chambers mid-way through, the tunnel is almost certainly an imitation of the pyramid’s cave. And just as underneath the Pyramid of the Sun, only evidence of offerings has thus far been found. Given this pattern and association, we at MEC theorize that when the INAH archaeologists reach the end of the tunnel they will find that their robot missed one chamber, making four like the Pyramid of the Sun’s cave, and that they will be filled with more dedicatory offerings, not the burial chambers INAH hopes to find.
Maya City Found in Campeche

Archaeologist Dr. Ivan Šprajc from the Slovenian Academy of Science and Arts has discovered yet another major Maya city in the rainforests of Campeche, Mexico. First spotted in aerial photography images and then ground-truthed by Šprajc and a team from INAH, the city has been named Chactun. The find is the largest city Šprajc has found to date, but only one of more than 80 ancient Maya centers he and his team have found since 1996. Šprajc has earned the well deserved recognition of being called this generation’s Ian Graham, who found dozens of major Maya ruins in the mid-20th century.

Chactun means “red stone”, chosen for the rust colored limestone from which the city’s stelae were carved. In all, 19 stelae have been located so far, and that’s just during the first short season of reconnaissance and mapping. The site covers an area of some 54 acres, a relatively small area to contain so many monuments.

Aside from its many monuments, Chactun has an impressive ceremonial central precinct, with 15 pyramids, palace structures, and a ball court. Its tallest temple stands over 23 meters in height. Considering its large temples and ball court, Chactun is clearly a major regional power, though its true name and full occupation history are as yet unknown.

Epigraphers are still translating the new texts, but thus far we know that Chactun was thriving in the Late Pre-Classic, with a ruler named Kinich Balam ascending the throne in 751 AD. A stela re-used as building block in the side of a building and stuccoed over dating to 731 AD hints at political upheaval just before Kinich Balam’s reign. We can look forward to more information about Chactun as research there continues, and no doubt to more Maya city’s discovered by Dr. Ivan Šprajc.
3rd Annual Maya Photo Contest

As we did for the 2012 and 2013 Mayan Calendars, we at MEC are putting out the call for photos to include in our 2014 edition. Do you have a photo of a Maya temple, or a piece of Maya art, or even a modern day Maya community that you’d like to share? If so, email it to us. The best photos we receive will be featured as one of the 12 month photos in our 2014 edition, along with a photo credit for the photographer. Those who win a spot in new edition will also receive a free calendar. You took all those pictures for a reason! Let us help you share them with people who will appreciate them like you do.

Thanks to Everyone Who Donated to MEC This Spring

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