

## **A Dark Day at the Ruins of El Cayo – The Story as Told by Peter Mathews**

EB: Ten years ago you had a hair-raising experience with bandits out in the jungle. How do you feel about that experience and how did that affect your commitment to Maya studies?



*The El Cayo altar at the center of the trouble*

PM: I've thought about it in hindsight, whether we should have gone in the first place, was it stupid, all those kinds of issues. We went in to rescue a monument. We had found the altar at El Cayo three years prior, during the field season right before the outbreak of the Zapatista rebellion. It was a particularly fine piece, virtually pristine. One chunk was broken off, and you could still see the carver's fine incision. It was probably buried almost as soon as it was dedicated.

And we reburied the monument almost immediately after we found it. As the years dragged on, we wondered whether we would ever get back to the site, which is on the Usumacinta River downstream from Yaxchilan. Mainly we worried about the political situation. We had been in contact with the local community, and word came back to us that it was too dangerous to work there. Eventually we went in for a short visit, but we were told it was still too dangerous to work. The community was quite worried about the altar, because there had already been three attempts to loot it. We made no promises but said we'd look into the possibility of taking it out. We all strongly felt that it should go to Frontera Corozal or Palenque, not Tuxtla Guterrez or Mexico City, even though the monument was of a high caliber and would fit nicely into the national museum. But that meant that none of the local communities would ever have the possibility of seeing it again.

The first step was to talk to INAH and see if they wanted something done. We also talked to the community leaders at Frontera Corozal. At that time they were preparing the town for tourism and were building a small museum. After a full meeting they decided they would take the monument. Perfect. People from all the surrounding communities could go into Frontera and have an opportunity to see it. And the monument would be safe. In addition, seven community leaders offered to go along with us in case of trouble. And so, with this step-by-step approach, it would all work out. We still had a bailout clause so that if anything happened along the way the mission would abort, so to speak. INAH arranged for a Pemex helicopter to fly in two days after we arrived. Our plan was to carry mattresses and cut big logs to crate up this great thing so that the helicopter could carry it back to Frontera.

We reached the ruins, three Mexican archaeologists, seven Chol Maya from Frontera, and me. It was getting dark and we were deciding where to leave the altar for the helicopter to pick up when a small hunting party came by. They were very

belligerent and asked us what we were doing. They had the right, after all, because we were trespassing on their land. We explained why we were there and showed them our papers, which in retrospect was probably a bad idea. They said they were going to talk to their community about this. We thought, right then, we'll just abort, we'll just get up and leave at dawn, this thing isn't going to work, it's going to sow too much dissension among the communities.

It was long after nightfall when the real fracas started. They took our boots off and they told us to run down to the river. We ran as fast as we could, and there were gunshots coming from the river. I heard the shots ping in the sand. One of us ran here, one of us ran there, and it crossed my mind that if any one of us tried to escape, the punishment for the others would be worse. They told us to line up at the edge of the river. I thought they were going to shoot us and let our bodies float downstream. A number of questions went racing through my mind: When the shooting starts, does my responsibility for the group come to an end? Was it every man for himself or should we stick together? Should I quietly wait my turn or see if there was some chance of getting into the river?

I was mulling it over and not coming to any conclusion when instead of shooting they started rifle butting us. Time stood still. It's funny what goes through your head. "My God," I thought, "that must have been hard." I was actually flying. They knocked me off my feet and broke my nose. I could hear my friends groaning. It seemed they were doing it for effect, and I thought maybe I should do it, too. Sure enough, they left us alone, with the ominous words, "The next time we see you we'll kill you."

We knew we ought to get out of there. But how? Six of the Choles said they would try to make it to the highway to raise the alarm, and they went off into the jungle in pairs of two. We didn't see them again until we got out. That left five of us, four archaeologists and one Chol who was lying on the ground, clutching his side. He couldn't swim, and one of my colleagues, Mario, couldn't swim either. We were debating how the five of us would get across the river when Mario literally tripped across a dugout canoe that was sitting at the edge of the water. I still don't know where that canoe came from, but we had no qualms about taking it. And so we paddled across the river, like the Hero Twins paddling to heaven.

We reached the opposite bank and clambered up through the saw grass. I was cut to shreds but that was pretty minor compared to what we'd been through. We lay there panting on the riverbank, debating what we could do. It was a long way upstream to Yaxchilan and a reasonable way downstream to Piedras Negras. We knew there were workmen at the ruins, building the archaeology camp. We also knew that Guatemalan guerillas on this side of the river had land-mined the trails. I voted for Piedras Negras because it was shorter and I believed I knew the land well enough. Once we got past the rapids, I knew we'd come upon a cross canyon that we could cut through and then another canyon and a valley and we'd reach Piedras Negras. That was my visual memory of the topographic map of the region, at any rate. I even thought that once we got to Piedras Negras we could walk a bit further, cross the border, and get transportation to Tenosique. We had to aim for something. I'm not quite sure why my views held sway, but they did.

So we climbed back down through the *imbal* and walked along the river's edge towards the rapids. I was thinking it would be good if we had the dugout canoe, but I had decided to leave it behind because I was afraid they would see it. Then, about twenty meters downriver, we found the canoe, which had got caught in an eddy. We put Mario and the Chol in the canoe, and with three of us trailing, we headed down to Piedras Negras.

The river was so quiet that night. I thought of the Titanic sailing on a dead calm sea. I'm not comparing what we went through to the Titanic, but I had always seen the river boiling and churning. It was the rainy season but the rains hadn't started. The water was slow and the river was low, and there was no moonlight, which helped us immensely. That crossing was surreal because it was so eerily quiet. We could hear the Choles who had attacked us up on the rise, going through our gear. That was an ever-present reminder that we needed to get away as fast as we could.

We made it through the rapids, pushed the canoe as hard as we could into the current, and scrambled up a steep, stony bank. Mario pointed out that the sun was coming up, and we decided to get some rest. That day we started pushing, but our Chol companion was rushing all over the place. The poor guy was really in bad straights. We didn't know the cause then and thought he was just petrified. The one rule I tried to establish was that we stick together as a group. He was just not listening. He'd dive off somewhere and slow us down until he came back or we got him back. The poor guy was in agony and out of his mind with pain. We didn't get very far, and we were all scratched up. "Look, this isn't going to work," Mario said. "We really ought to get back to the river." And so we all voted and that's what we did.

The second night the rains started with a passion and the river must have risen ten feet. Massive trees were being washed downstream in the huge flood. If it had rained the night before, we couldn't have made it across the river. It rained all the next day, and through the downpour we saw a little plane, sent by Merle, with Alfonso Morales in it, flying over the site. We were in a clearing near the river and didn't dare go back upstream. That's when a Guatemalan guerilla appeared out of nowhere and asked us what in hell we were doing there. "Don't worry," he said. "No Mexican is going to come over here without our say so. You're safe, but we don't have any food."

We just sat tight until we heard a launch coming from way upstream. We flagged it down, but by this time our Chol friend had gone off again. While the others got in the boat, I went searching for our friend and eventually found him in the bush. The boatmen took us down to Piedras Negras, where they planned to spend a few days dropping off provisions. But after taking one look at us, they agreed to take us back upstream.

Going through one of the rapids, we heard the screech of rocks scraping the keel. Water was mounting. By that stage we had gotten past the nasty communities, and I thought, "Oh God, now we're going to have to spend another day or two just fixing the boat." But we managed to plug it up with banana leaves and get to Yaxchilan. There we met the six Choles.

As we approached Frontera, I wondered what kind of reception we'd receive after leading their local dignitaries into danger. But they were so wonderful. The whole

town turned out and met us on the bank. The community officials said, "Can you walk? We want to hear what happened, but first we want to get you back." They had a truck waiting to take us into Frontera and another waiting to take us to Palenque. They were so well organized. When we got to the military checkpoint on the main highway we had no boots, no passports, and we were caked with blood. The colonel radioed Palenque and told us to wait. Finally a convoy full of soldiers and police came to usher us to the hospital in Palenque, one in each truck. The Chol, as it turned out, had a ruptured spleen and was immediately taken into surgery. The doctors wanted to reset my broken nose, but I said, "I'll take it as it is."

Later we had a television interview, and the first question was, "Were your horrible attackers wearing bandanas?" I faced the camera and said, "No, I want your viewers to know they were not Zapatistas fomenting discord." I think the incident was 90 percent banditry and 10 percent patriotism. They did not want to give up their artifacts.

Things could have been worse. After we were attacked, I was dreading hearing the sound of the helicopter. I was terrified it would land, the pilots would get shot at or kidnapped, and then the army would have to be sent in. If the army came looking for us, they would have gone into El Cayo and shot anyone who moved. Those people were our friends, whereas the attackers were from outside. We had a tremendous bit of luck. It's truly amazing that no one died.