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Archeological Discoveries in Guatemala

by LADB Staff

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Recent archeological finds in Guatemala have reset the clock for scientists engaged in the ancient art of trying to decipher the mysteries of the Mayan civilization. Workers in the field have abandoned one certainty after another in the attempt to separate myth and folklore from a reliable reading of the historic record.

The latest diggings suggest that Mayan culture had spread hundreds of years earlier than previously thought. Archeologist Francisco Estrada-Belli of Vanderbilt University unearthed a pair of giant masks at a site in the ancient lowland city of Cival. The fanged masks measure about five by three meters. Husks about the eyes have led to speculation that they represent a Mayan god of maize. The site had been looted and damaged extensively in the past, but much was left behind by those who preceded Estrada-Belli, some artifacts missed by just inches. Looter and damage, archeologist and excavate, are relative terms of considerable operational overlap, as the facts in this instance demonstrate.

Estrada-Belli was making his way through a tunnel dug by a looter, when he chanced upon one of the masks while peering into a crack in the wall. The pair of masks dates from about 150 B.C., and are the oldest sculptures of their kind presently known. They flank a staircase ascending to a room at the top of one of the five pyramids at Cival. This pyramid is positioned to be oriented to the point on the horizon where the sun rises at the equinoxes. The city's plaza is dated at about 500 B.C. A set of five shattered jars arranged in a cross pattern, five jade axes, and more than 100 jade pieces are thought to be contemporary with the construction of the plaza.

Estrada -Belli thinks the jars were used for water offerings during the maize growing season, and the jade pieces symbolize the maize. Also discovered was a stone slab dating from about 300 B.C. depicting the oldest known portrait of a Mayan king.

Archeologists' belief system shaken

Taken together, the discoveries reduce to the status of mere belief the long held scientific assessment that Mayan culture developed first in the central highlands of Guatemala, and spread later to the lowlands. "We are pushing back the beginning of dynastic rule in the lowlands at least 200 years," said Estrada-Belli. The city, large enough for 10,000 inhabitants, was abandoned about 100 A.D. Shortly before abandonment, a defensive wall was hastily constructed, leading to the speculation that the city fell to a rival kingdom. It remained abandoned for 1,000 years.

One difficulty the find presents for Mayan archeology is that the field is now left strewn with damaged chronology and taxonomy. "It's pretty clear that 'Pre-Classic' is a misnomer," Estrada-Belli said. The dating of Cival places it in the Pre-Classic period, but the contents of the city indicate rule by kings, complex iconography, grand palaces, polychrome ceramics, and writing. All these are

hallmarks of the Classic period. The Pre-Classic may, according to archeological lore, have begun around 2000 B.C. According to what might be called "classic" archeology, classic Mayan civilization began around 250 A.D., about the time of the earliest written inscriptions in city plazas and temples.

The period ended around 900 A.D. with the collapse, from uncertain causes, of the great Mayan Cities in Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and Mexico. These events triggered the Post-Classic period, which ended with the coming of the Spanish conquerors. All that may be wrong now, but, said the scientist accustomed to seeing things written in stone, "It may be too late to change the [classifications]."

Scientists have known for a while that the neatly charted pre- to-Post-Classical designations probably didn't hold water, and the archeologist was not overly concerned. "Ultimately, I think this information will be of tremendous help to understand the early development and the unexpected complexity of the Pre-Classic Mayan kingship," Estrada-Belli said. The question of time seems to have been central to the existence of the city.

Estrada-Belli believes the entire city was designed to measure time. "It had an important astronomical function. It's not a coincidence that the central axis of the main buildings and the plaza is oriented to sunrise at the equinox," he said. He thinks this "shows that the plaza was for public rituals celebrating the recreation of cosmological order in the beginning of the cycle of maize, as well as the accession of Mayan rulers."

Another spectacular find

Not far away, at Cancuen, a site in southern Peten near the Alta Verapaz line, another Vanderbilt team under the leadership of Arthur Demarest uncovered another spectacular Mayan artifact. This was a stone panel weighing about 42 kilos and measuring less than a meter in width depicting the eighth-century king Taj Chan Ahk. The piece was in perfect condition. It shows the king sitting on a symbol for Earth, on a jaguar skin-covered throne, installing rulers in the nearby city-state of Machaquila.

Text on the panel confirms Ahk as one of the last great classic period kings. He controlled a vast portion of the Peten. He is thought to have maintained his power by political and economic means, rather than by war, during a period of decline of other Mayan city-states. Said Demarest of the find, "This panel is incredibly important. Every once in a while you have a beautiful, spectacular piece of art that is also profoundly historically important. It is the best piece of Maya art that has ever been found in an excavated context. It looks like it was made yesterday."

Of equal significance, the project also dug up a 250 kg stone altar set into the royal ball court used by Ahk. A find like this "has never happened in Maya archeology," said the scientist, who, like Estrada-Belli, got the jump on the competition. "These things have always turned up in [private] collections. They've always been looted." Two other markers from the court were discovered in the last century, one in 1905, and a second that was stolen in 2001. The markers were used as goal posts, and they all show Ahk in full regalia playing against a visiting ruler.

According to Demarest, these games were political equivalents of photo-ops to mark treaties and other power plays. Cancuen, a port city on the Rio Pasion, was also where, five years ago, Demarest and his team, along with researchers from the Ministry of Culture, discovered the largest Maya palace ever found. Another Ahk spectacular, the 23,225 square meter facility had 200 rooms with vaulted ceilings, and 11 courtyards. Demarest interprets the size as a means to induce shock and awe in rivals. "By the time you got to the foot of the king, you were ready to do anything for him," he explained.

Cancuen, situated on the river, was a gateway for trade between the city-states of the Peten rain forest and those of the volcanic southern highlands, brokering in obsidian, jade, seashells, and stingray spines. These were all used in fashioning the trappings of wealth and power. Demarest goes about his fieldwork under the protection of a half dozen armed guards. He was instrumental in the capture of the alleged thieves of Ahk's goalpost in 2001. Their trial comes up this month, and Demarest has been threatened with death if he testifies.

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