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Site Q Exists In Guatemala

by LADB Staff

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A longstanding archeological mystery was solved in Guatemala recently with the discovery of Site Q, whose existence has been in doubt for years. Arguments about the site began about 40 years ago, when carved sculptures of Mayan origin from the period 600 to 900 A.D. began showing up on the international antiquities market. Their provenance unknown, scholars began speculating that they came from some as-yet-undiscovered site somewhere in the Peten.

The name, Site Q, abbreviated the question "que?" that frequently came up with regard to the objects. These objects, stelae and the like, came to rest in museums and private collections, and Site Q became something like the Holy Grail for archeologists. One of the features that suggested they were all from the same place was a snakehead glyph. Other common features convinced experts they were all from a single Mayan city.

In 1997, an expedition headed by Ian Graham of the Peabody Museum at Harvard found evidence leading to speculation that La Corona, a ruin in the Peten, was Site Q, temporarily putting to rest a popular hypothesis that Site Q was a myth. More recently a team of scientists found proof, called incontrovertible by some scholars, of the existence of the site. The proof was an in-situ panel with over 140 hieroglyphs that fill in a key 30-year gap in classic Maya history.

In April 2005, Yale archeologist Marcello Canuto discovered the panel at La Corona in the Tiger National Park. Stanley Guenter, a graduate student and specialist in Mayan glyphs at Southern Methodist University (SMU), analyzed the writing and noted similarities in style, chronology, and texts to the material in the museums. Because these objects found their way to collections through nonacademic means, they are referred to as looted items. Said Canuto, "This discovery concludes one of the longest and widest hunts for a Maya city in the history of the discipline."

A no-less enthusiastic David Freidel of SMU, leader of the Waka excavations a short distance from La Corona, supported the interpretation. "This is substantial evidence that this is Site Q," said Freidel. "Marcello was touched by the gods." Canuto said the possibility still exists that Site Q was not a single place, and the unsourced objects might in the future be traced to other sources with related histories and traditions. But the new discovery was of a type of fine-grained stone that closely matches the items now in museums, and this, he said, "goes a long way to allowing us to demonstrate that many, if not most, Site Q monuments were looted from La Corona."

Archeologists' interest now turns to finding evidence that two kings mentioned in the inscriptions, Chak Naahb' Kaan and his son K'inich Yook, lived and ruled in Site Q, or La Corona, in the last half of the seventh century. A date on the newly found panel, 677, the equivalent of Oct. 25, is given for the dedication of the temple in which it was found, a temple dedicated to a god named K'uhul Winik Ub'. K'inich Yook is thought to have built the temple. Another date on the panel, 658, refers to an

earlier temple dedicated by Chak Naahb' Kaan. Archeologists said these dates filled gaps in their knowledge of Maya politics.

The discovery owes in part to blind luck and to the hard work of the entrepreneurs who preceded the scientists. On the final day of the expedition, while others were busy mapping the site, Canuto said, "I looked into a trench where looters had obviously dug through to the interior" of a temple. Canuto stepped into the temple and found the stones.

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