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Guatemalan Masterpiece Pushes Back Dates Of Mayan Civilization

by LADB Staff

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A chance 2001 archeological discovery in Guatemala has revealed itself just recently to be a spectacular find, likened by archeologist William Saturno of the University of New Hampshire to the Sistine Chapel.

The find is a wall in an underground room from around 100 BC, depicting the Mayan creation myth and the coronation of a king. "It was like discovering the Sistine Chapel if you didn't know there had been a Renaissance," Saturno said. "It's like knowing only modern art and then stumbling on the finger of God touching the hand of Adam." The dating is older than first suspected. "Our original dating of the murals to approximately AD 100 was a conservative estimate based largely upon stylistic comparisons. We now know from the radiocarbon dating of the murals and of the construction and ancient debris that buried them that they more accurately date to 100 BC," said Saturno.

The wall measures about 10 meter by 1 meter. It is part of a mural showing the birth, death, and resurrection of the maize god's son pictured four times with different animals offering a blood sacrifice from his genitals, all done in more colors and elaborate brush work than had ever been seen in Mayan art. The god is shown first standing in water with a fish, then on land with a deer, then in the air with a turkey, and finally in a paradise with flowers. The sequence is interpreted to mean the corn god is establishing these realms. At the end is the new king's coronation in the company of the gods.

"The coronation is in the same style as the ceremony that takes place during the Classic Maya period (250-900 AD)," said Saturno. "You see the same crown shown for the next 800 years." The mural adds grayish blues, oranges, and flesh tones to the black, red, yellow, and pink found in paintings elsewhere. It was the centerpiece of a room thought to have been a preparation site for royal offerings. "Our best guess is that this was a preparation room where the king would rehearse the mythology for ceremonies," Saturno explained. In addition to the archeological significance of the mural, it is also great art.

Archeologist David Freidel called the painting a masterpiece, saying the scenes "are executed with the confidence, compositional imagination, and technical perfection of an artist who, while anonymous, must rank with the best the world has ever known." The site is the city of San Bartolo, about 51 km from famed Tikal. It is older than Tikal, but comparable in size.

Earlier this year, Monica Pellecer, a Guatemalan archeologist working with Saturno, excavated what turned out to be the earliest known burial site of Mayan kings, just over a kilometer from the mural, and dating from about 150 BC. Pellecer found the bones of a man wearing a jade plaque around his

neck, surrounded by seven vessels, including a frog-shaped bowl and a vase with the image of Chac, the Mayan rain god. These discoveries indicate that the Mayan civilization was fully developed more than 2,000 years ago because, said archeologist Robert J. Sharer, "the institution of divine kingship is in place; the imagery is consistent with later times."

The two finds taken together, according to Saturno, demonstrate a fully developed Mayan political hierarchy in a relatively small place at a time when the area was probably dominated by the large city of El Mirador, about 96 km away. This is not the first discovery to force a rethinking of the antiquity of Mayan civilization (see NotiCen, 2004-05-13). An accidental discovery, fortuitously preserved. The events leading to the discovery were truly accidental.

An adventure gone wrong in 2001 left Saturno dehydrated and unfed for some days. He made his way into a tunnel dug by the original discoverers, entrepreneurs seeking artifacts, to escape the heat of the day and conserve his strength. The tunnel led to a small building buried beneath a Maya pyramid. Saturno beamed a flashlight on the wall of the building and saw the mural. Only about two meters of the mural were visible, but even that was enough for scientists to guess it was important.

Stephen Houston, an expert on the subject, said at the time, "The parts of the mural that are visible show a complex iconography and rich palette that we barely suspected for that period." The rest of the mural was covered with mud, preserving it from the destructive effects of the humid tropical climate. Even before they were certain of its date, the archeologists were sure it was the earliest mural in this condition.

Saturno said in 2002, "We're not yet certain this mural is the absolute oldest, but it's certainly the oldest in this condition. For this early time period, there's nothing really comparable." Prior to the discovery, examples of Maya art from that period had been limited to ceramic pieces, stone monuments, and architectural sculpture. Therefore, said Saturno, "although we have individual artifacts, there have been few narratives or images of historical or mythological events."

Another archeologist, Norman Hammond, called it "arguably the most significant find since Bonampak. Bonampak is the acme of Classic Maya mural painting, but the San Bartolo mural shows that this semi-naturalistic style was in existence half a millennium before." The Bonampak murals in Mexico, discovered in 1946, were painted about 790 AD, not long before the 900 AD collapse of the Mayan civilization.

A different kind of writing, yet to be deciphered

In addition to this mural, there also others on the other walls, and all are accompanied by archaic Mayan writing similar to later glyphs that have been deciphered, but, said Hansen, "the pre-classic is a different system. We can't make sense of it until we have more samples, but we're getting into it." One way of doing that is to compare the writing with that of the Popol Vuh, the famed Maya text written 1,600 years later. The writing is important in itself. Many archeologists have argued that pre-classic societies were not fully civilized because they did not have writing. These same scholars have also denied the existence of formal kingships in the period.

As spectacular as the find is, for Saturno it is "a tip of the iceberg. The site is one square kilometer in area. This room we've spent so much time in...it's a 4 meter by 9 meter space."

This discovery, several scholars have said, will enable archeologists and art historians to change their view of Mayan culture in the Pre-Classic period (2000 BC to 250 AD). San Bartolo began as a farming area around 700 BC. About 300 years later, the people started constructing a plaza and pyramids. It never became a powerful city, however, and was abandoned by 100 AD. Later societies filled many of the early buildings with rubble and built houses over them, but the area never functioned as a Maya city again, according to Saturno. This appears to account for the rubble that filled the mural room. Two of the walls were smashed and used for fill, but they too bore murals. The researchers are collecting the fragments in hope of reassembling them.

Funding for the project has been provided by the National Geographic Society's Committee for Research and Exploration, the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Harvard's Peabody Museum, and Dumbarton Oaks

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