



ARCHAEO MAYA

The Newsletter of Maya Exploration Center

www.mayaexploration.org

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Archaeoastronomy Shines at the SAAs



The participants of the 2007 SAA Ancient Maya Astronomy Symposium

Most scholars who attend the annual conference of the Society of American Archaeology are the sort of creatures who literally dig into every strata of the human past. Their profession demands concentration, physical stamina, and consummate skills with a pick. By nature, they are hunters, adepts of the materially real. After months hunched over rocks and bones, they had scraped their boots of antediluvian mud and for five April days in Austin, Texas, stood up and talked with other living members of their clan.

The exceptions at this intellectual potlatch were participants in this year's special session on Maya archaeoastronomy, organized by MEC with the final discussion delivered by astronomer Dr. Anthony Aveni, the eminent founder of the field. Archaeoastronomers spend little time staring at the ground. They pore over hieroglyphic inscriptions, decipher

codices, interpret works of art, measure the angle of the sun's rays in ruined palaces, calculate, ruminate, and observe. Even though some watch the sky from crumbling cities in the jungle, theirs is a hermetic occupation. Compared to dirt

archaeologists, these men and women are aesthetes who search for light and shadow. The evidence is impossible to handle, the critics say, too clean, too airy, too ephemeral. Yet, as this series of brilliant presentations made clear, research has reached a rigorous new level.

Venus, star of dusk and dawn, opened the proceedings. Susan Milbrath spoke on the Venus Almanac; Martha Macri, on symbols for Venus in Maya art; and John Justeson, the relation between Venus cycles and eclipse cycles, beginning in Olmec times. The moon appeared in Christine Hernandez and Gabrielle Vail's astronomical interpretation of the late Maya codices, while Stanislaw Iwaniszewski discussed the Lunar Series at Copan and Quirigua. Christopher Powell's talk on solar alignments at Palenque offered exquisite proof for the ceremonial use of natural light. The sun at zenith passage was the focus of Harold Green's discoveries at the

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Letter from the Director

This newsletter is a month late. Why? Because, with so many good things happening, our small staff didn't have a moment to sit back and reflect. In fact, this newsletter should also report on our three great travel courses in May, but because of space and time limitations, we'll have to include them in the summer edition. By far the achievement I'm most proud of this spring is described in our lead article: the Ancient Maya Astronomy symposium we organized at this year's SAA conference in Austin, Texas. We assembled a stellar group of scholars, presented our research to a crowd of over 200 people, and truly advanced the field of Maya archaeoastronomy.



Inside this edition of ArchaeoMaya, you'll read about the many travel courses and public tours we conducted this spring, including returning groups, new groups, and new themes we hadn't explored before. You'll also learn about the journey that Christopher Powell and I made to Chaco Canyon and the deep hospitality extended to us by the Pueblo and Navajo peo-

ples. In our news section, we report on the discovery of a new Olmec site and the unfortunate resurgence of unrest in Oaxaca.

As I write this letter, we're busily preparing for a full summer of travel courses, including our first in Peru, two in Yucatan, and our second high school community service program in Chiapas. Come the fall, our travel schedule slows, but new television documentaries, publications, and speaking engagements will keep us hopping. All things considered, I couldn't be happier about how MEC is growing and you who receive this newsletter are an essential part of our success. To better serve our 1000 loyal newsletter recipients, we will be introducing a new membership system in 2008. In addition to this newsletter, members will receive access to Jstor, a powerful online database of journals available only to members of research institutions. Thanks to everyone for your interest in our research, continued support, and respect for the achievements of ancient Maya civilization.

Sincerely,

Olmec Site Discovered Near Mexico City

A 2500-year-old city displaying strong Olmec characteristics has been found just 25 miles south of Mexico City, hundreds of miles from what is considered the Olmec "heartland," in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Named Zazacatla, the site was found under a housing and commercial development in the state of Morelos, an area thought to be devoid of Olmec influence. Though archaeologists do not believe its inhabitants were ethnically Olmec, the evidence indicates that Zazacatla was a small egalitarian community swept up in the Olmec cultural revolution that first brought writing, monumental architecture, and kingship to Mesoamerica. Leading Olmec scholar Dr. David Grove of the University of Illinois noted that Zazacatla is a good example of how much more of Mexico's ancient past remains undiscovered.

MEC Meets Native Astronomers at Chaco Canyon

At the invitation of Anna Sofaer and the Solstice Project, Christopher Powell and Ed Barnhart drove across the high desert to Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, to observe the May 1st lunar minimum alignment at the ruins of Pueblo del Arroyo. Chaco Canyon contains a number of archaeological sites built by the Anasazi, whose culture flourished around A.D. 1000. Chaco is known for its large kivas, four-story stone structures, and vast network of roads, which linked the ancient pueblos to settlements far beyond the canyon. Chaco is also known for the "Sun Dagger." High on Fajada Butte, a large spiral petroglyph, hidden by tall boulders, marks the knife-like rays of the sun at summer solstice. The solar complex was discovered by Anna Sofaer three decades ago.



Sunset rainbow at Pueblo del Arroyo

As soon as Powell and Barnhart arrived at the Chaco Culture National Historic Park, they struck out on a five-hour hike across the canyon basin. Seeing the ancient ruins for the first time, they were certain that the great round kivas and high stone walls were the remains of once powerful ceremonial centers. As the Solstice Project found, some of the ancient structures are aligned with the sun and moon.

The activities of May 1st began with a morning tour of Chetro Ketl and Pueblo Bonito, led by Anna Sofaer and archaeologist Rich Friedman of the GIS Program of Farmington, New Mexico. Back at the visitor's center, the afternoon talks drew tribal leaders, educators, and students from the Pueblos of Hopi, Taos, Zuni, and Santa Clara and from the Navajo Nation. In his opening speech, Hopi tribal member Phillip Tuwaletsiwa, former Deputy Director of the National Geodetic Survey, praised the accomplishments of the Solstice Project and expressed the Hopi people's approval for Anna's respectful approach to the astronomical knowledge of their ancestors.

Christopher Powell presented MEC's astronomical discoveries at Palenque, followed by his own research on

ancient Maya geometry. As his talk ended, storm clouds rolled over the arid landscape. Despite fears that the much-needed rain would spoil the evening's moon-watching event, the dinner conversation was lively. Powell and Barnhart fielded a host of questions and learned about native legends that connected the Hopi people with the distant cultures of Mesoamerica.

Under falling rain, the dejected crowd trailed out to Pueblo del Arroyo. Clouds completely obscured the eastern sky. But far off on the horizon, near the place where the moon was to rise, a rainbow appeared. In moments, it became a double rainbow. Happily chattering, snapping photos, and marveling at the beauty of rain in the desert, the group hardly registered disappointment at having missed the moon.

This first meeting between MEC and the Solstice Project was a fortuitous beginning for collaborative research that will draw parallels between ancient Pueblo and Mesoamerican astronomy. To learn more about the Solstice Project, log on to www.solsticeproject.org.

Upcoming Public Tours

Day of the Dead in the Chiapas Highlands, October 27- November 3, 2007
Pillars of the Classic Maya, Palenque to Tikal, November 14-23, 2007

Learn the details and sign up at www.mayaexploration.org/tours.php

MEC Spring Travel Courses

Lyndon State College in Chiapas, February 24 - March 3

Neither rough flights nor bumpy roads daunted math professor Daisy McCoy and her Maya studies class from Lyndon State College, Vermont. Once they reached the colonial city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, they were ready to tour the churches, museums, and artisan markets and sample the local cuisine with anthropologist Chip Morris and Carol Karasik.



Lyndon State group at Palenque's Temple of the Count

"Do as the locals do," became the motto as everyone jumped into a combi and, to the strains of Maya music playing on the tape deck, rode past fields of corn to the Tzotzil Maya town of San Juan Chamula. Chip's lecture the night before had filled them in on the new and the old, modern Maya fashions and ancient textile symbols. In a changing world, ancient beliefs persist. Inside the Chamula church, aglow with candles, shamans chanted prayers and blew on little gourds to summon their patients' souls. Afterward, the group visited the sacred cave of the Earth Lord, to whom the prayers were addressed.

In the flower-growing town of Zinacantán, richly embroidered huipiles adorned the saints in church. At the house of local weavers, students saw the latest styles, and savored handmade tortillas fresh off the griddle.

Overwhelmed by the raw beauty of the culture, the group traveled to the lowlands with Christopher Powell, who guided them through the Classic Maya sites of Tonina and Palenque. At their first sight of the ruins, students were awestruck. The jungle walk with Alonso Mendez was equally thrilling. A refreshing swim under the waterfall at Misol Ha fulfilled everyone's romantic dreams.

From Palenque, the students traveled to the colonial

town of Chiapa de Corzo, once a great center of pre-Columbian culture. The last day included a boat trip down the spectacular Sumidero Canyon. Following the festive final dinner, masked *Parachico* dancers whirled across the plaza.

This travel course was the first to combine the ancient Maya past, Spanish colonial period, and living Maya culture of Chiapas. Judging by the group's enthusiasm, it was a rare, life-altering journey.

University of Pittsburgh at Bradford in Yucatan, March 3-10

For the fourth year in a row, Professor Isabelle Champlin brought a group of students and alumni down from Bradford, Pennsylvania. This year's destination was the Yucatan, and the theme was cultural tourism. With Merida as a home base, Alonso Mendez guided them through major ruins during the day and presented engaging lectures every night. At Chichen Itza and Mayapan, they discussed Maya astronomy and the politically turbulent times of the Post-Classic Period. In Uxmal, they were underwhelmed by the cheesy content of the evening's Sound and Light Show – definitely a lesson in the dangers of cultural tourism. The next day, however, provided a counter example. Traveling to the village of Santa Elena, they were warmly welcomed by a Maya family who opened their hearts to the young foreigners. As children played in the yard, the woman of the house described how their traditional home was constructed and then gave everyone a chance to try their hand at making tortillas on the comal.

Dzibilchaltun was the last site on their route, and Felipe Chan Chi was there to explain his groundbreak-



UPitt at Bradford students enjoying Merida's nightlife

MEC Spring Travel Courses (Cont.)

ing theories on how the Temple of the Seven Dolls functioned as an astronomical observatory. The course provided another great experience for the students of UPitt at Bradford. Plans are now in the works for their 5th annual travel course with MEC—this time perhaps to Teotihuacan.

Midland College in Highlands Guatemala, March 10-17

This course began at an ideal time and place: Sunday in colonial Antigua just before Holy Week. First, students paid a morning visit to the sacred tomb of Brother Pedro in the San Francisco church, where long lines of people waited to pray for his healing power. By early afternoon, solemn processions from the village of Jocotenango reached the city. Over flower-strewn streets, hundreds of people, men dressed in purple robes, swayed under the weight of long wooden biers bearing images of the persecuted Christ. That evening, while standing under Santa Catalina Arch, the students watched as the illuminated figures of Jesus and the Virgin of Dolores were slowly carried into the night.

The next day presented the biggest challenge of the week: ascending Pacaya, the active volcano that looms on Antigua's horizon. First by horseback along steep and dusty trails and then by foot across sharp lava beds, the group finally reached the lava flow. Though exhausted, they still had enough energy to toast the marshmallows they had brought from home. The students then traveled west for a two-night stay on the shores of Lake Atitlan. A boat took them across the lake to the village of Santiago Atitlan, where they visited the hallowed shrines of Maximon and Santiago. On Thursday morning they arrived in Chichicastenango during the bustling height of market day. After hours explor-

ing the labyrinth of market stalls, the group had the good fortune to witness a Maya shaman's ceremony taking place on the hilltop right outside their hotel window.

On the final day, the students headed back to Guate-



Midland College group ascending Volcano Pacaya

mala City, stopping at the Post-Classic ruins of Iximche along the way. Upon arriving in Guatemala City, they were surprised to encounter road blocks and hundreds of armed guards protecting the hotel district. An international banking conference was in session, and security was intense. After a week among the friendly and pacific highland Maya, the militarized streets of the capital were a stark reminder of the social strife under which Guatemala still toils.

Archaeoastronomy... (Cont. from Page 1)

pre-Classic site of Chocoma, Guatemala. Ivan Sprajc also recognized the importance of zenith passage at numerous sites in Campeche, all of them sharing, along with distant Teotihuacan, an orientation 15° east of north. The centrality of zenith and nadir in the Maya creation story was brought to light by Alonzo Mendez and Carol Karasik, whose paper went on to suggest that the Maya understood the precession of the equinoxes. Michael's Grofe's mathematical exegesis on the Serpent Series in the Dresden Codex supported this conclusion. Juan Ignacio Cases discussed celestial metaphors in Maya art and literature. Gerardo Aldana drew a philosophical portrait of a society that kept strict time while making room for chance.

Over 200 people applauded the presentations as well as Dr. Aveni's lively summary. His penetrating questions were pursued during the MEC sponsored private symposium that followed. Thanks to organizers Ed Barnhart and Harold Green, spirits ran high. The unifying Maya view on what we call the sciences and humanities seems to have rubbed off. Archaeoastronomers are giving us a new way of thinking about how the ancient Maya thought.

News From the Field

Unrest in Oaxaca

Last summer in Oaxaca, what began as the annual teacher's strike for better resources and pay escalated into a massive protest that occupied the heart of the city for five chaotic months. Demonstrators set fire to buildings, barricaded the historic downtown streets, and spray-painted walls with slogans accusing Governor Ulises Ruiz of murder. As hostilities mounted, the dazzling Guelaguetza Dance Festival, celebrated since the 1700s, was abruptly cancelled. The catalyst that turned the teacher's strike into widespread civil unrest was the governor's ill-fated decision to remove the striking teachers from the zocalo by force. His strategy only aggravated the situation. Police squads and tear gas swelled the ranks of the 40,000 strikers to 100,000 angry protestors calling for the governor's resignation.

In the fall of 2006, amid the divisive atmosphere of Mexico's presidential elections, leftist groups from around the country joined the protests, at one point staging a march of over half a million people. As one of his last acts as president, Vicente Fox sent 4000 troops to Oaxaca, finally dispersing the protestors in October.

In a report released on May 24, 2007, Mexico's National Human Rights Commission condemned the twelve deaths that occurred during the conflict and urged the Mexican government to act upon evidence that federal police had tortured detained protestors. One week before, thousands of protestors had returned to Oaxaca's zocalo, vowing to block the Guelaguetza for a second year. While residents of Oaxaca are hopeful that the Commission's findings will ease tensions, the People's Assembly of Oaxaca (APPO) says that the protests will continue until Governor Ulises Ruiz resigns.

MEC Spring Tours

During the first half of 2007, seven public MEC tours brought people from all over the United States to the Maya area. At times the schedule was so heavy that every MEC staff member was on the road, guiding people through highland villages and jungle ruins.

The first tour of the year was organized for former tour members eager to visit Yaxchilan and Bonampak with Alonso Mendez. They loved it, and soon after wrote to book another tour with Alonso in 2008. The Considine tour, in February, was for eight adventurous friends committed to exploring remote ruins. After enduring the muddy route from Palenque to Tikal, the troupe made a 25-kilometer hike in and out of Dos Pilas. In all, the hardy travelers visited eight sites, with only one relaxing break: Sunday in the town of Tenosique enjoying the colorful Pocho Festival. After the expedition, Chris Considine wrote, *"With the jungles before us, hiding a fallen civilization, Dr. Ed Barnhart was there to lead us on an adventure of a lifetime. He was cool, calm and collected, with a breadth of knowledge and experience that is close to encyclopedic."*



Considine tour in Aguateca (Photo: Considine)

In late February, MEC conducted its first cacao-oriented tour. Organized by Mark Scisenti of the Kakawa Chocolate House in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the tour participants were devoted chocolate lovers with a

healthy curiosity about the Maya. After two days visiting the cacao plantations of Tabasco, the group toured the major archaeological sites of Chiapas with Christopher Powell and then searched for chocolate-related spices in the Lacandon rainforest with Alonso Mendez. The tour concluded at a plantation that produces the perceptual opposite of chocolate—vanilla. The theme of cacao was a delicious success. *Chocolate: Part Two* will savor Oaxaca in the spring of 2008.

In March, the Dreyfus family came to Chiapas for a five-day tour of Maya ruins. The occasion was Seymour Dreyfus's birthday. The former chairman of the board of San Antonio's Alamo Pre-Columbian Society, wanted to celebrate his 70th birthday by sharing his enthusiasm for Maya civilization with his siblings, children, and grandchildren. Christopher Powell and Alfonso Morales helped the family do just that. After the trip, Seymour wrote: *"Chris and Alfonso were great hits. Chris even went beyond to engage the young ones with his warmth and humor. I believe that each one will remember Palenque and the experience of sharing so much within a family."*

Betty DeGroh's family, from Sioux City, Iowa, wanted to experience ancient and modern Maya culture as well as an April vacation on the white sands of the Yucatan. To avoid the commercialism of the Maya Riviera, they stayed in the quiet beach resort of Puerto Morelos. With archaeologist Lilia Lizama as their leader at Coba, Chichen Itza, and Ek Balam, they received solid information, instead of the usual tall tales told by the guides. And instead of driving directly from Chichen Itza to the coast, the family relaxed in the colonial town of Valladolid. Betty wrote to MEC saying, *"We especially enjoyed and appreciated Lilia for her knowledge and her attention to the three youngest members (9, 10 & 11) of the group."*

MEC Spring Tours (Cont.)

It was no easy task for her to keep us on track and out of the way of other groups. We especially liked seeing the backs of the buildings. And her pictures helped us to better see glyphs and carvings."

Spring's busy schedule ended with MEC's third public Palenque to Tikal Tour. Led by Alonso Mendez, the four tour members not only learned about Maya culture but also acquired a thorough introduction to the people, plants, and animals of the region. A last-minute vote changed the original itinerary, swapping a day of sightseeing around Lake Peten Itza for an adventure at the ruins of Uaxactun. It's exactly that sort of flexibility that makes MEC's tours so unique and enjoyable.

Although MEC is primarily a research and education institution, we believe our programs for the general public are as important as our travel courses for students. Public educational tours are part of our grassroots philosophy. One person at a time, be they colleagues, students, or people who know nothing about the Maya, everyone we lead through the Maya world develops a newfound appreciation for America's most advanced ancient civilization.

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Thanks to Everyone Who Donated to MEC This Spring

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