



ARCHAEO MAYA

The Newsletter of Maya Exploration Center

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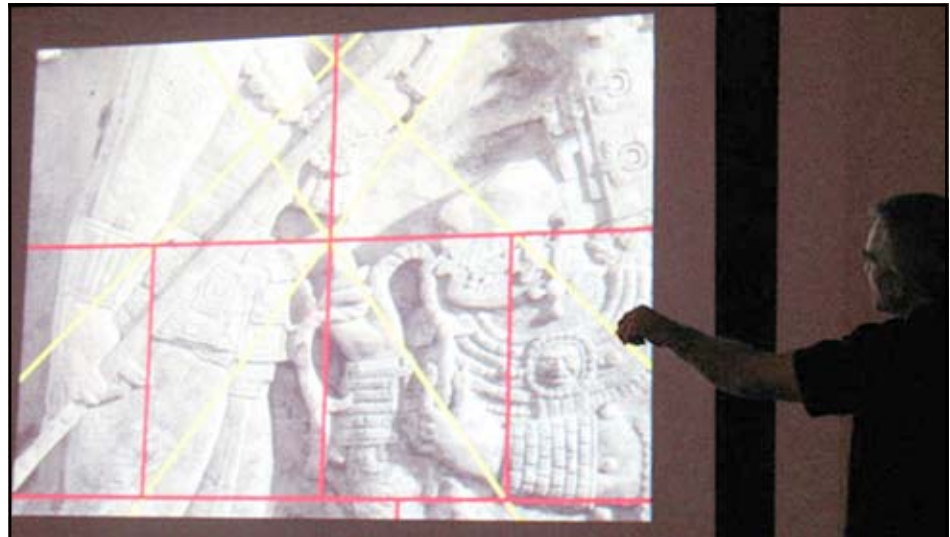
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- Launch of "Maya Maps" website
- Texas Maya Meetings

Powell Presents at National Mathematics Conference



Powell speaking in San Antonio about his dissertation on Maya

The day before he was scheduled to speak at a major mathematics conference in San Antonio, Christopher Powell was leading a tour through the jungle of northern Guatemala. Thousands of miles and a world away, he flew out at dawn, landed in Austin that evening, and after a few hours of sleep, he and Ed Barnhart were on the road at sunrise, heading for San Antonio. On January 12, the Mathematical Association of America (MAA) was holding its National Joint Mathematics Meetings, an annual event and the largest of its kind in the United States. Powell was invited to give the opening talk before the session on the History of Mathematics. He made it to the podium, computer in tow, with a full five minutes to spare.

After a glowing introduction by Program Chairman Amy Shell-Gellasch, Powell delivered a provocative one-

hour lecture on ancient Maya geometry. The 200 mathematicians who filled the auditorium responded with a round of enthusiastic questions. Inspired by their interest, Powell presented his latest ideas on the "near perfect" geometric formulas that seem to underlie Classic Maya art. Again, audience excitement was palpable.

Following the talk, Powell and Barnhart had a chance to reunite with participants in last May's MEC-MAA Maya Mathematics Tour in the Yucatan. Powell's lecture afforded a larger opportunity to exchange knowledge with professional mathematicians. In keeping with MEC's educational goals, Powell's PowerPoint presentation was made available free of charge to teachers in the audience. For MEC, the conference was an important step toward increasing public awareness of Maya contributions to the world of mathematics and geometry.



Letter from the Director

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As MEC begins 2006, I'm proud to recount a few of our accomplishments in 2005. We conducted six study abroad courses, eleven educational tours, and gave sixteen public lectures. Our website received 1.6 million hits, and we were featured in a History Channel documentary. Years of solar observations at Palenque culminated in our groundbreaking paper on the Temple of the Sun, to be published in *Archaeoastronomy* this summer.

This edition of *ArchaeoMaya* tells how we ended 2005 and the great start we've made in 2006. It also includes information about the upcoming Texas Maya Meetings as well as a critical preview of Mel Gibson's Maya epic, *Apocalypto*.

January was a memorable month, and some of its more important events are chronicled here. Our New Year's Eve party and the burning of Alonso Mendez's incredible effigy of the Maya Corn God started the year off with a bang. The January edition of *Austin Monthly* featured a personality profile on me as an explorer, instructor, and the Director of MEC. The first day of the year saw the Zapatistas begin a six-month march to Mexico City, commemorating the twelfth anniversary of the uprising they staged in the Chiapas Highlands. One week later, Subcoman-

dante Ramona, the legendary Zapatista leader who drew wide popular sympathy for the Maya cause, lost her battle with cancer. That same day, *Science* published an article announcing that the earliest Maya hieroglyphs were discovered at the site of San Bartolo, pushing back the beginnings of Maya writing to 300 B.C. In Palenque, January 29 marked the nadir passage as well as the ending of katun 13 under Pakal's reign.

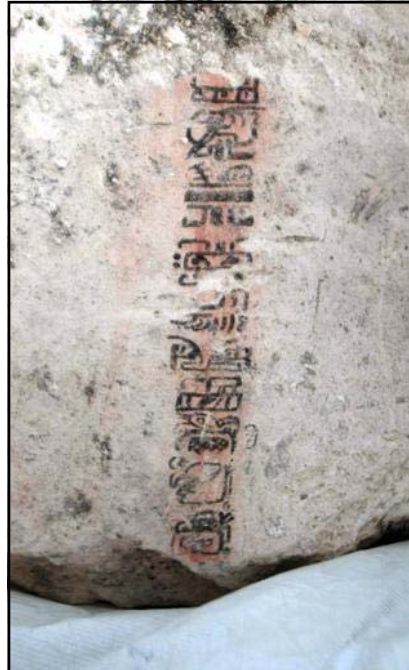
For MEC, a productive team meeting in early January solidified our goals for 2006. Christopher Powell's lecture at the Mathematical Association of America meetings on January 12 was a solid indication of the great things to come in 2006. During this year's first quarter, we'll be running three study abroad courses and five educational tours. After two years of planning, John Bloebaum, El Panchan, and MEC are teaming up to build the Maya Exploration Center bookstore, Palenque's first and only source for English language books.

I'll be heading back to Chiapas at the end of February for our first high school travel course, organized for the students of Emily Repp at the Bentley School in Lafayette, California. As this newsletter goes out across the country, my family and I am sailing down the Nile to visit the sun kings of Egypt. While I'm here, I'll make an offering to Ra for all you supporters as a thanks for your continued interest in our work at MEC.

Sincerely,

Earliest Maya Hieroglyphs Discovered at San Bartolo

A new discovery in Guatemala has pushed back the evolution of Maya hieroglyphic writing by 300 years. The evidence, published in the January issue of *Science*, comes from a line of ten hieroglyphs painted on a building block at the site of San Bartolo. The block was found deep inside the rubble core of the Templo de las Pinturas, a structure that has captured considerable attention because its elaborate wall murals contain the earliest depictions of Maya gods and kings. Carbon 14 tests of the black paint date the hieroglyphs to 200-300 B.C.



Ten hieroglyphs dating to 200-300 BC

Although the glyphs are finely painted, they are difficult to translate. Thus far, only one of the ten glyphs has been deciphered. "We can't read this stuff because it's so early," David Stuart of the University of Texas at Austin told *Science* reporters. "It's like trying to read some of the writing in

medieval manuscripts of the 1500s. Even though it is our same writing system, we don't recognize it."

Mesoamerican writing is thought to have originated around 400 B.C. among the Zapotecs of Monte Alban, Oaxaca. Until the recent discovery at San Bartolo, the earliest known example of Maya hieroglyphic writing dated to 32 A.D. The text, carved on a stone stela found at Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas, was already fully developed. The much older hieroglyphs at San Bartolo also exhibit the complexity and sophistication of a well-established writing system. Although the origins of New World writing remain a mystery, San Bartolo has provided epigraphers with an exciting piece of the puzzle. As Stuart concluded, "I think the Maya participated in the invention of writing much more than earlier thought."

New Years' 2006 in Palenque

For the fifth year in a row, El Panchan hosted a fun-filled New Year's Eve party replete with delicious food, live music, and fire dancing. As hundreds of tourists and local residents packed Don Mucho's Restaurant, participants in MEC's New Year's in Palenque Tour enjoyed front row seats for the late night festivities. When midnight approached, tour participant Rob D'Amico, a freelance writer from Austin, assisted members of the MEC team in presenting the evening's guest of honor, "Año Viejo Man." The burning of the old year in effigy has been an El Panchan tradition since 2000, when Alonso Mendez created a "Millennium Man" stuffed with fireworks and balloons filled with butane. This year Alonso outdid himself, creating out of bamboo, cane, and corn husks an eight-foot-tall effigy of the ancient Maya corn god emerging from the shell of a giant turtle. (The image of the corn god being reborn from the shell of the turtle, symbol of Orion, appears on painted ceramics depicting the Maya story of creation.)



"Año Viejo" effigy burning New Year's Eve at El Panchan

Four men carried the huge manikin down the dense jungle path and into the restaurant parking lot. Then they filled him with fireworks and hoisted him above the river—just as Orion began his nightly journey across the Palenque sky. At midnight, with hundreds of spectators crowding the bridges and balconies of Don Mucho's, the effigy exploded in a spectacular burst of noise and flames, lighting the way into 2006.

Zapatistas Disarm Palenque



Subcomandante Marcos "Delegate Zero" waves to the crowds in Palenque

Accompanied by 5000 Maya supporters, Subcomandante Marcos, the charismatic leader of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), staged a quiet political rally in Palenque on January 3. Calling himself "Delegate Zero," the spokesperson for the Zapatistas isn't running for office, he says. He merely wants to act as a thorn in the side of the politicians competing in this year's national elections. The Zapatistas represent the Other Campaign, "from below and from the left," demanding democracy and equality for the poor.

When the rebel caravan approached the commercial center of this cattle-ranching region, loudspeakers boomed out assurances of peace. But the merchants, shoppers, and foreign tourists who lined the main avenue didn't seem sure. The police and press stood ready. As rancho music blared over the sun-baked plaza, a thousand people waited stonily in the heat. At noon, sirens screamed and clouds of black smoke billowed in the sky, but the crowd that rushed to the scene was held back by police barriers. In the midst of all the nervous anticipation, a house had caught fire.

Finally the main event slid into focus as the Zapatista convoy slowly crawled up the street, chanting slogans and waving banners. A white truck pulled up to the plaza, and a dozen rebels, armed and masked, jumped out. Marcos, with his trademark pipe, pressed brown shirt and military garb, made his way to the stage, followed by thousands of marchers: barefoot teenagers, tired men in rubber boots, older women dressed in traditional

wraparound skirts and lace blouses, all carrying knapsacks, all wearing black masks; "the faceless ones, the hidden ones," come from their hiding places, come from their shells, in the jungle, in the mountains, for a long walk in the sun.

The rally was oddly subdued. During the initial uprising in 1994, 10,000 armed rebels invaded San Cristóbal, shocking the local residents, the nation, and the world. After the failed San Andrés Peace Accords, 250,000 Zapatistas retreated to autonomous communities where, with the help of foreign NGO's, they began building schools, health clinics, water systems, and organic coffee cooperatives. In 2001 the Zapatistas reappeared on the national scene, marching to Mexico City on behalf of Indian rights. As a pressure group, they contributed to the collapse of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had been in power for 70 years. Still, in a state that is the poorest in the nation, the Zapatistas, and the Maya in general, remain the poorest of the poor. As a result, the basic Zapatista message is the same—equality with justice and dignity for the Maya people. The real change is their strategy and scope. Now the Zapatistas say they are ready to unite with urban workers, students, and farmers to create a national grassroots movement.

Once on stage, Marcos whipped out his digital camera and took photos of the tourists. While the mayor smiled down from his balcony at city hall, Marcos quietly told the crowds: "The ancient city of Palenque is the symbol of Mayan culture, of its splendor and progress. But the culture is not dead. The Maya are still alive!" These were not idle words. A few years ago, Marcos was advocating a revival of Classic Maya religion as a means of fostering cultural identity and ethnic pride. At the time, he adopted the name of the legendary warrior Votan. Now Marcos is "Delegate Zero," denouncing the corruption of the major political parties, which have done nothing for the poor.

That night the campaign set up makeshift headquarters near the market where marchers slept in the streets before departing in the morning for the mountains. The following week the Other Campaign would take their message to the Maya working as day laborers, waiters, and maids in the popular beach resorts of Quintana Roo.

Gibson's "Apocalypto" Crucifies Maya History

Since last July, Mel Gibson has been promoting *Apocalypto*, a film destined to bring the ancient Maya into the Hollywood limelight. Though the filming and content have been closely guarded secrets, we can share some details here. His film crews have been sighted on the coast of Campeche and in the ruins of Edzna. Lately they've been filming around Lake Catamaco, in the Tuxtle Mountains of Veracruz.

Gibson's screenplay is set during the final days of Maya civilization, around 1500 A.D. The story focuses on a common Maya man and his struggle to save his family from enemies bent on destroying their way of life. With all the brilliant achievements we'd like to see recreated on the big screen, bloody warfare and ritual sacrifice are apparently the movie's dominant themes. "Hey, this is for kids with strong stomachs," Gibson shrugged.



Split second "easter egg" of Gibson lampooning during a somber scene

The film is guaranteed to increase global awareness of Maya civilization, but how will it be portrayed? The movie's website and trailer are full of historical, cultural, and geographical inaccuracies. The trailer opens with a hostile group of foreign invaders putting Mel's Maya on the run, a major plot feature with no historical backing. Then there are clips of the famous Bonampak murals, bastardized to include sensational scenes of beheadings and human hearts held aloft in clenched fists. Despite abundant information on Maya cities of the period, the film set is a strange amalgam of Maya architectural styles, with the Pyramid of the Niches from El Tajin (not a Maya city) dominating the foreground. Last, and perhaps most disheartening, is the shot of a screeching baboon. If Gibson's research was so shallow that he failed to know that baboons are not indigenous to the Americas, what other blunders can we expect?

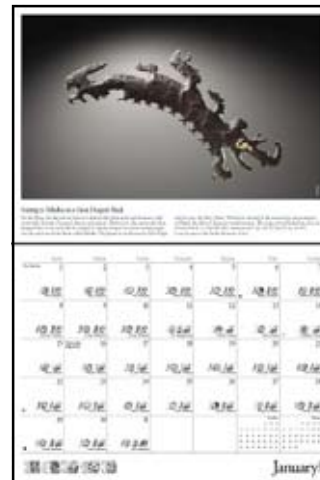
Gibson's big budget clearly omitted cultural content consultants. Although the story is about the Maya, Gibson confessed that most of the cast was hired out of Mexico City. Since the characters are supposed to speak Yucatec Maya, the dialog may be a stretch for the actors. When an "easter egg" was discovered in the trailer showing Gibson hamming it up amongst a group of somber Maya extras, all hopes of his taking Maya culture seriously faded. *Apocalypto*, due for release this summer, may focus attention on the Maya, but lamentably the film seems neither historically accurate nor culturally sensitive.

The trailer can be seen at

www.apple.com/trailers/touchstone/apocalypto/

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Archaeoastronomy to Publish MEC Research Paper



Equinox Sunrise in the Temple

Maya Exploration Center is proud to announce that our recent discoveries in Palenque's Temple of the Sun are to be published in the next edition of *Archaeoastronomy: The Journal of Astronomy in Culture*. Entitled, "Astronomical Observations from the Temple of the Sun," it's the first in a series of articles on the role of astronomy in the history and culture of Palenque.

Our collaborative research began in 2002 when we tried to confirm the long-standing theory that the Temple of the Sun was aligned to winter solstice. It proved to be untrue, but in the course of our observations, we discovered more significant alignments. At summer solstice and equinox we witnessed diagonal rays of light travel across the temple floor and illuminate the corners of the rear chambers (Archaeoastronomers call these dramatic lighting effects "hierophanies.") Alonso Mendez, the

article's lead author, recorded an additional alignment that occurred at dawn during zenith passage. Later, Mendez conclusively proved that the temple's primary alignment was to the rising sun at nadir. The central axis of the temple is also aligned to the maximum northern and southern extremes of the moon. On December 15, 2005 we had the good fortune to observe the moon at its maximum northern excursion, an event that takes place every 19 years. In the light of these discoveries, Mendez developed a hypothetical blueprint for the design and layout of the temple and posited a new interpretation of the art and texts carved on the main panels.

After three years of study, it was time to write up our findings and to share them with the public. Carol Karasik, who had been with the team during most of the observations, took the lead, doing much of the background research and using her writing skills to present our findings in an interesting and engaging format. Publication of our paper in *Archaeoastronomy* brings years of hard work to fruition. Look to our website's "Research" section soon to read the paper for yourself. UT Press (www.utexas.edu/utpress/) should publish the article some time this summer.

Palenque Theme at the 2006 Texas Maya Meetings

The Texas Maya Meetings, held at the University of Texas at Austin, March 14-19, is the preeminent arena for cutting edge Maya scholarship. This year's meetings will focus on recently discovered inscriptions found in Temples XIX and XXII at Palenque. During The Hieroglyphic Forum (March 18-19), David Stuart will present his new theories about Palenque's mythology and the identities of the "Palenque Triad" of patron deities. Joining Stuart will be Peter Mathews, Guillermo Bernal, Erik Velasquez, and Palenque's own Alfonso Morales. The new interpretations promise to be revolutionary.

Other changes are in store. The three-day epigraphy workshop (March 14-16) will feature two new seminars, one on the *Popol Vuh* led by Dr. Alan Christensen and the other, a seminar conducted entirely in Spanish. Another first: Ed Barnhart and Alonso Mendez will present their latest research on the last day of the workshop.



Leading off Friday's symposium, the celebrated Mayanist George Stuart and National Geographic photographer Kenneth Garrett will discuss the history of Maya exploration. The symposium will then shift to recent discoveries made by noted field archaeologists and art historians working in the Maya area: David Freidel, Simon

Martin, Steve Houston, Karl Taube, Barbara Arroyo Pieters, and Julia Guernsey-Kappleman. As an added bonus, William Saturno and Heather Hurst will present new findings from the site of San Bartolo, Guatemala. Finally, Stuart and Garrett will present the Second Annual Linda Schele

Award to an illustrious scholar.

As always, the Maya Meetings are a source of non-stop revelations. We encourage all Maya enthusiasts, professional and amateur alike, to attend. For more information and registration procedures, log on to www.utmaya.org.

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