



ARCHAEO MAYA

The Newsletter of Maya Exploration Center

www.mayaexploration.org

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MEC Lectures on the Road to 2012

Maya Exploration Center's Director, Ed Barnhart, has been traveling to college campuses around the country to talk about 2012 and "the end of Maya time." The response has been phenomenal. Over 1200 students crowded the auditorium at Orange Coast College, California; 370 in Grand Junction, Colorado; and 500 at Albright College and Pennsylvania College of Technology.

Why such large turnouts for an academic presentation? As Barnhart says, "Everybody loves an apocalypse." Citing an Assyrian tablet from 2800 BCE, he explains that for the last 5000 years every generation has predicted an apocalypse. It seems to be some errant part of human psychology. The Maya creation story, *Popol Vuh*, falls right in step: after mentioning the multiple creations of the universe, the central action of the story takes place in the fourth creation, our current world.

Dr. Barnhart presents the kind of detailed information on 2012 that most discussions ignore - the mechanics of the Maya Long Count calendar. He describes how the Long Count works and how the Maya dates correlate with the Gregorian calendar. By the end, audiences under-



Over 1200 people turned out for the lecture at Orange Coast College

stand that December 21, 2012 will simply mark the completion of the 13th Bak'tun. (A Bak'tun is a 400-year period, roughly equivalent to our western notion of a millennium.)

Ancient Maya mathematicians recorded immense periods of time that extended beyond the limits of the Bak'tun cycle. In fact, numerous hieroglyphic dates stand outside the rigorous logic of the calendar. Once we know this, we can rest assured that the wheels of time will continue to revolve.

Dr. Barnhart has taken a good look at some of the apocalyptic theories about 2012 and turns a cold eye on the bad science that props them up. He makes it clear that the Maya never predicted the catastrophic events that media gurus erroneously attribute to "Maya wisdom." It must be symptomatic of our times that although everyone leaves the lectures a little more edified, some people are deflated by the news that the Maya "apocalypse" is a terrible misunderstanding.



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Letter from the Director



Off we go! Even in this dismal economy, MEC's study abroad programs are going strong. We have programs running straight through the summer. Our Maya courses continue to broaden in scope, and Peru is becoming a larger component of our educational offerings. In addition to our travel programs, our public lectures and appearances in television documentaries are increasing. You can expect to see MEC scholars on multiple documentaries airing on the History and Discovery Channels.

I want to take a moment in this letter to express my gratitude for the work of MEC's Travel Coordinator, Susan M. Prins. After working as a contractor in 2008, she became an official employee of MEC as of January 2009. Her efficiency, command of Spanish and great people skills make her an invaluable member of our team. Thank you Sue!

In this issue of ArchaeoMaya, you'll read about the many good things we've been involved in this winter. I have been traveling across the US, presenting lectures aimed at separating fact from fiction about the "end of Maya time" in 2012. On the technology front, we've developed new websites and software to help people better understand the mechanics of the Maya calendar. Alonso Mendez and Michael Grofe have been leading study abroad programs and participating in events that help preserve ancient Maya traditions.

For over ten years, Chip Morris has been conducting an artisan development project in Naja, designed to preserve and market traditional Lacandon crafts. His project is one way of maintaining the culture. The balché ceremony described in this issue was attended by Alonso Mendez and Carol Karasik and was sponsored by Kenosis, Prescott, Arizona, as part of an effort to promote intercultural exchange among indigenous peoples of the New World. If you or your group would like to participate in a similar ceremony, please contact Kenosis (www.kenosispiritkeepers.org) or MEC. Supporting Don Antonio's work through discreet and enlightened tourism may encourage renewed interest in Lacandon traditions.

One of MEC's main goals for 2009 is to get you and others who support our research and education programs more involved. I know I've been saying it for over a year but I promise our membership system is coming out soon! Those who join will be more than just advocates; they will be research associates in their own right. A powerful database named JSTOR will be available to each member, providing access to documents essential for independent research. We also encourage you to donate to MEC. With the economic downturn closing the doors of non-profits across the country, we need your support as never before. Please give what you can and help us continue to educate the world about one of the greatest civilizations in history – the Maya!

Regards from Austin,

Birmingham Southern College, January 2009

A Report by Dr. Michael Grofe –

We could hear the deep roar of the howler monkeys hidden among the giant trees as we hiked up the jungle trail to Yaxchilán. After an hour traveling down the Usumacinta River on a morning launch, we were almost at the end of an incredible adventure that took us from the temples of Palenque and Bonampak in Mexico to Yaxha and Tikal in Guatemala. This is one of the most spectacular and all-encompassing trips that MEC offers, and for myself, Dr. Peter Van Zandt and the students from Birmingham Southern College, it was a trip we will never forget.

We thought we had seen it all, and then a moss-covered temple appeared through the trees. Wide-eyed, we walked single file into a labyrinth of tombs and tunnels. High in the eaves of a corbelled arch hung clusters of quivering bats and huge whip scorpions waiting for their next meal. A large lizard with shining scales slipped silently into a hole in the wall. We stumbled up a few stairs, turned a corner, and ended up where we began. A second doorway led to another dark and twisting passageway. More bats clung to the damp stone walls. At last, there was a final staircase and a glimmer of natural light.

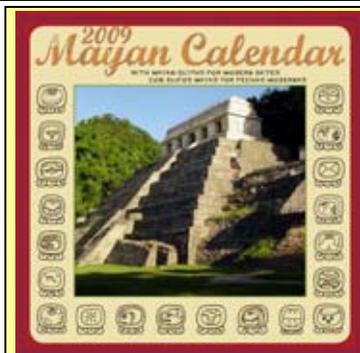
We climbed through the temple door and entered another world. The central plaza of the city opened before us, bathed in emerald sunlight. The towering ceiba trees formed a great green atrium. We were the only ones there. After several cloudy days, the sun had finally broken through, and it was spectacular. Spider monkeys browsed in the trees above us as we explored some of the finest art in the Maya world: carved lintels, bas-reliefs, portraits, complete hieroglyphic texts detailing the 1200-year-old history of the kings and queens of Yaxchilán.

We leave with fond memories of the experiences we shared and the friendships we made on the trip together.



BSC students making their way through Tikal

We trekked across Tikal at night and climbed Temple IV to watch the misty dawn. Some slept in hammocks under a thatched palm roof in Lacanja, some befriended the children of Flores. I got to tell some of my favorite stories, ranging all the way from talking gorillas and Australian walkabouts to Maya astronomy and mythology. We walked through cacao groves, scratched the head of a furry yellow Kinkajou, and, to top it off, with Alonso Mendez's help and guidance, we figured out how to make a Mesoamerican rubber ball. Now that's a trip to remember!



2009 Mayan Calendar

This month is your last chance to purchase the 2009 wall calendar that gives you the Maya date for every day of the year. The sales year will officially end on March 21st, the Spring Equinox. If you don't already have one, log on to www.mayan-calendar.com to buy online. While you're there, calculate your Maya birthday and peruse all of the information we've posted about Maya calendrical cycles.

Don Antonio: The Last Lacandon



Lacandon spiritual leader Don Antonio stands alone in his milpa

In preparation for the balché ceremony, don Antonio walked the surrounding jungle, stripping the bark off several balché trees, and after placing the shredded skin of the tree in a hand-hewn wooden canoe, he added honey, covered the brew with palm leaves, and let it ferment for a week. Don Antonio's wife spent days making turkey tamales while the canoe's precious cargo of mead bubbled outside don Antonio's god house, where his deities waited to be fed and worshipped. The ritual to be held would be a social occasion as well as a healing ceremony.

Don Antonio Dominguez has spent all of his 75 years in the remote Lacandon community of Naja. The little lakeside village once lay deep in the Lacandon rainforest, but now the rainforest is almost gone. Under the open sky, two treeless rows of houses point like arrows toward the lake. Over the rolling green hills, colonies of campesinos eke out a bare existence from the former jungle's tired soil. Little by little, these last-ditch corn farmers, some from the distant deserts of Sonora, have encroached upon Lacandon territory, and although the vast region is officially a national ecological reserve, nobody does anything to curb the steady invasions. There is simply not enough land for a burgeoning population. Four hundred years ago the Lacandons were refugees themselves, fleeing the brutalities of the Conquest. Somehow they learned to live with the jungle and preserved the ancient ways. They cleared small sections of jungle and planted corn, beans, squash, and tobacco on their rotating garden plots. Now nothing seems to grow. They used to hunt boar, deer, and monkeys, but the animals disappeared long ago.

The community is suffering from an endemic loss of faith, the stresses caused by growing outside influences. Years ago, their cousins in Lakanja succumbed to fundamentalist missionaries proselytizing God's word. The 300 inhabitants of Naja became the last holdouts against a tireless campaign aimed at saving souls. Religious conversion, they saw, went hand in hand with the shift from a barter system to a money economy and increasing pressure to sell off their mahogany for aluminum pots, plastic shoes, store-bought cloth, and glass beads. Naja's main source of strength and quiet defiance was Don Antonio's father-in-law, the great seer and shaman, Chan Kin Viejo. As the spiritual leader of his

people, Old Chan Kin maintained the ancient myths and traditions and successfully warded off the outside world. But since Chan Kin's death, in 1996, everybody, including his sons and two widows, has joined the local Baptist church. Everybody but Don Antonio. His is the only god house left in Naja.

For someone who hadn't been there awhile, the silence of the birds and monkeys was an ominous sign. But not as alarming as the loudspeaker blasting hymns from the makeshift chapel that stood beside the gravel airstrip. Unperturbed, Don Antonio lit copal incense and began to pray to his gods. The loudspeaker suddenly stopped, the wind stopped, and time stood still. With tear-filled eyes, Don Antonio announced that this would be the last balché ceremony he would perform. He was old and weak. They had worn him down, he said. The pastor had offered him a free ticket to Jerusalem.

Whether we live by the Maya calendar or the rules of the modern world, change is inevitable. Yet the extinction of a culture is unthinkable. Was the time for surrender truly at hand?

We had come with a Hopi elder from Arizona who was searching for ties between his people and the Maya. His people had also struggled against social pressures yet still drew from the deep well of their traditions. For this occasion, Harold Joseph brought along his blessed corn meal, and in the Hopi language prayed for the lone keeper of the Lacandon gods. *Lord, let me die, but not die out.* We are still awaiting an answer.

Dream Tour of Chiapas

What is the secret ingredient for a trip of a lifetime? Advanced planning is essential, but as we know, plans may go awry, and we have to count on our resilience and sturdy characters to see us through. And then when we least expect it, a certain magic shines, upon us or within us, and makes all our dreams come true. Call it serendipity.

When Bill and Charity Gourley decided to visit Chiapas with their close friends, Tom and Linda Williams, they brought along myriad lifelong passions: astronomy, medicine, crafts, cuisine, and poetry. During their ten-day custom tour, they fulfilled all their interests, and more.

With Chip Morris as their guide through the Chiapas highlands, they watched weavers working on backstrap looms and embroiderers putting the finishing



Maya Weaver (photo by C. Gourley)

ing details on their festive costumes. In the pottery village of Amatenango, they met the skilled artisans who produce flowerpots, water jars, and fantastic life-size jaguars. In Zinacantan, they had the good fortune of attending the Fiesta of Saint Sebastian, a dazzling festival that happened to include two wed-

dings along with the usual ceremonial dances. In Chamula, the two doctors in the group stood by quietly as local shamans conducted curing ceremonies in the church. In San Cristóbal, there were visits to the museum of indigenous medicine, an outstanding exhibit of colonial art, and tours of the churches and markets.

The Na Bolom hotel and museum was the perfect place to stay. Dinners were ideal occasions for sampling the local cuisine – squash blossoms, mole, and *huitlacoche* – and for lingering conversations about art, poetry, and, of course, Maya culture.

Leaving San Cristóbal, Carol Karasik led the group deeper into the past. At Tonina they experienced their first breathtaking sight of a Maya ruin, and at La Venta Park, a spectacular introduction to the colossal art of Olmec civilization. In between, they spent two intense days at Palenque with Alonso Mendez, soaking up the astronomy, art, history, and epigraphy of the site.

Colds, bad backs, and rain plagued the tour but failed to dampen spirits. Thanks to the inextinguishable curiosity of our guests, this trip was a stimulating intellectual adventure for everyone.



Zinacantan wedding (C. Gourley)



Upcoming Public Tours

Pillars of the Classic Maya, Palenque to Tikal

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www.mayaexploration.org/tours.php

News From the Field

[La Venta Heads Defaced](#)

In late January, a group of tourists entered La Venta Park in Villahermosa, and splashed five priceless Olmec monuments with a mixture of salt, cooking oil, and grape juice. The seemingly innocuous concoction is actually a potent recipe for destruction, a chemical blend that will seep into the sculpted basalt and cause slow deterioration to the stone. Fortunately, the guards at the outdoor museum apprehended the culprits before they were able to do more damage. The vandals were taken into custody by local police but were released soon after paying a fine.

The gang of clean-cut felons belonged to an international apostolic movement called The New Generation. The evangelical sect, founded in Riga, Latvia, has established churches in Europe, Australia, and the US. Members of the American branch first attracted notoriety when they painted the rocks along several US highways a deep blood red color, symbolic of the blood of Christ. The church aims to bring God's kingdom to all walks of life. The defacement of the Olmec sculptures was evidently motivated by the group's ambition to destroy "pagan" artifacts.

The monumental heads and stelae installed in La Venta Park represent some of the finest examples of Olmec art. These megalithic works from the ceremonial center of La Venta were created by a little known people who spoke Mixe-Zoque and sprang up in the swamps of Tabasco and Veracruz around 1500 BCE. Master jade carvers, they traded as far south as Costa Rica and Colombia and as far north as the mouth of the Mississippi River. The Olmec, "the rubber people," invented the Mesoamerican ball game and the rubber ball. They also originated the counting system and calendar and developed basic religious ideas that were later adopted by the Maya. The Olmec are regarded as the "mother culture" of Mexico.

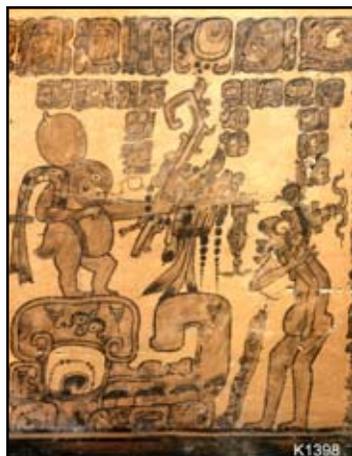
MEC Tech Corner: iMaya



Dr. Ed Barnhart has created a new Maya Calendar application for the iPhone. Called iMaya, it provides the current date in the Maya calendar, date conversion calculators, and much more. Features on the application's home page provide major events in Maya history and the activities that Maya day keepers recommend for any given day. A birthday calculator function gives you someone's birthday in the 260-day Tzolk'in calendar and the personality traits of a person born on that day. This function also connects to your contact list, allowing you to catalog the Maya birthdays of everyone you know. An information section provides additional data about a host of Maya time cycles, as well as current debates on calendar-related issues. Ideal for Maya scholars and enthusiasts alike, iMaya is now available for purchase on iTunes.



A Rude Rabbit in Maya Mythology



Vessel K1398 (photo by J. Kerr)

A new translation of a complex hieroglyphic text has yielded some surprising results. Russian epigrapher Yuriy Polyukhovych has been working with vessel K1398 and the conversation it records between a rabbit and God L. The scene shows the rabbit standing above God L holding the god's signature Muwan bird hat in his paw. Yuriy's translation of the text above the rabbit's head reads *pul ajol utz' awit k'uulis Itzamaat* or "dip your head, smell your ass [and] penis Itzamaat." To further substantiate his translation, he points out that modern Maya people in Chiapas and Yucatan are commonly still using the term *awit* as "ass", even going so far as to put it on t-shirts. European epigrapher Dmitri Beliaev slightly disagrees with Polyukhovych's translation, suggesting "smell your ass, penis Itzamat." Either way, it would appear that the rabbit is insulting God L and refusing to return his hat. If Yuriy's translation is correct, then he has uncovered another fragment of the colorful Maya mythology lost to the ravages of time. For those who are who are expecting ancient wisdom to emerge from the old texts, well, there you go.

Starting for the first time in 2009 everyone is invited to join the Chautauqua Travel Courses!

Once restricted to only college level professors of science, the Chautauqua program is now open to anyone with an interest in higher level education. There are still spaces available in two of Dr. Barnhart's courses this coming summer. Click on the links below to learn more and sign up through the University of Texas at Austin's Chautauqua Field Center.



Inca Mathematics and Culture in Peru: Cuzco, Machu Picchu, and the Sacred Valley

May 30 - June 6, 2009



Ancient Astronomy and Mathematics in Angkor, Cambodia and the 2009 Solar Eclipse in China

July 12-24, 2009

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