



ARCHAEO MAYA

The Newsletter of Maya Exploration Center

www.mayaexploration.org

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The Comalcalco Brick - A Reference to 2012?

Last month in the international press, INAH announced their acknowledgement of a second reference to December 21, 2012 from the ruins of Comalcalco. Before you also "acknowledge" this second reference, there are a few things you should consider.

Let's begin with what "the brick" really is. It's a sun dried mud brick, about one foot in diameter and 1-2 inches thick. It's not a new discovery, but rather one of thousands of bricks unearthed decades ago from all across the site. Hundreds of those bricks have graffiti on their interior sides. The vast majority of that graffiti are crude scratches made while the bricks were drying - things like faces, buildings, and animal figures - commonly thought to be the doodles of the workers who built Comalcalco's temples. The very few bricks which contain hieroglyphs are of interest to the question of whether or not the average Maya person was literate.

Located today in northern-central Tabasco, Comalcalco is considered the westernmost edge of the ancient Maya world. It fell in and out of Palenque's Baakal kingdom regional sphere and fought wars against nearby Tortuguero. In fact, Comalcalco is the enemy city mentioned on Tortuguero Monument 6, famous as the only known reference to 2012. It's perhaps for that reason that INAH was will-



A mud brick temple at Comalcalco in Tabasco, Mexico

ing to accept the possibility of a second reference at Comalcalco. Tortuguero Monument 6 was carved in the Late Classic and though we can't date the Comalcalco brick that specifically, it most likely came from the Late Classic as well.

Now to the most important part - what it says. The decipherment of the brick's four glyphs was first proposed in 2009 by the accomplished Dutch epigrapher Erik Boot. INAH acknowledged the brick back then, but as with latest announcement, they neglected to credit Boot with the research. Erik Boot had a drawing of the brick in an archive of portable object texts, but no photograph with which to verify the drawing's accuracy. Being sure to qualify his translation as tentative, Boot shared his work for a museum exhibit in Leiden, with FAMSI's Aztlán community, and for a Wayeb Notes publication

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Letter from the Director

Happy holidays and winter solstice! As I write this letter in a local Austin coffee shop, I'm happily reflecting upon all the things we at MEC have to be thankful for. 2011 has been a year full of new adventures, research and philanthropic achievements. We've expanded our course offerings into new parts of Guatemala, Peru, and even Cambodia. New publications from Michael Grofe, Carol Karasik, Chip Morris, and myself along with multiple appearances on documentaries have pushed our research yet further out into the public eye. MEC donations to the AIA Gala for Site Preservation, the Archaeological Legacy Institute, and Archaeology Magazine have contributed to archaeological preservation all around the world. I'm proud that our small organization can impact the field in so many positive ways.

In this issue of ArchaeoMaya, we report on a number of exciting finds and recent events. In our lead article we go beyond the sound bites in the news to give you a broader understanding of the "Comalcalco Brick." We also report on the big news out of Panama and why the small site of El Caño is about to change the way we see central American archaeology. And my personal favorite - how a case of corporate bullying turned into a massive grant to support Maya cultural awareness.

2012 promises to be a big year for

MEC, but we can't do it without your support and participation. In response to your requests, we've organized a series of educational tours for the general public focusing on Maya calendrics and astronomy. We are counting on many in our community to finally make the leap from reading about the Maya into joining us on an adventure to see it for themselves. If not in 2012, then when?

Whether or not you decide to travel with us this next year, I want you all to know how much we appreciate your interest in our research and education programs. Every person we connect with connects to another, telling them about the things they've learned about the Maya. That's the way, person by person, that MEC does our part to help the Maya take their rightful place as one of the world's most brilliant ancient cultures.

Happy Holidays,



Rich Tombs Discovered in Panama

At the central Panamanian site of El Caño, tombs filled with gold are coming out of the ground faster than archaeologists can keep up with them. First found in the 1920's by American adventurer Hyatt Verrill and further excavated in the 1970's, a lack of stone architecture and only a few "middle class" burial mounds had branded the site as rather unremarkable. But Julia Mayo, an archaeologist at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama City, thought the site had much greater potential.

Mayo had been studying reports from the nearby site of Sitio Conte, where the richest collection of golden artifacts ever found in Panama began tumbling out of a river cut in the early 1900's. Teams from Harvard and University of Pennsylvania descended on Sitio Conte in the 1930's and excavated over 90 tombs full of painted ceramics, precious stone jewelry, and a massive amount of gold. Mayo noted that the surface evidence at Sitio Conte was the exact same as at El Caño - mounds and a line of enigmatic monoliths.



*Gold pendant from El Caño
(photo by David Coventry)*

Analyzing 3D images from a geophysical survey she initiated in 2005, Mayo detected a slightly raised circle about 260 feet in diameter. Digging at the dead center of that circle is where her team made their incredible discoveries. In 2010, at a depth of 16 feet, they uncovered the remains of a warrior covered from head to toe in golden armor and fine jewelry. Then in 2011 the team found another gold covered warrior, this one accompanied by a baby who was also covered in gold and jewels. Beneath the pair stretched a layer of tangled human skeletons, assumedly sacrificial victims.

Aside from the importance of El Caño's treasures, radio carbon dating of the skeletons is also of great interest. The burial dates hover around 900 AD, a time in which the major cultures to the north and south of Panama were



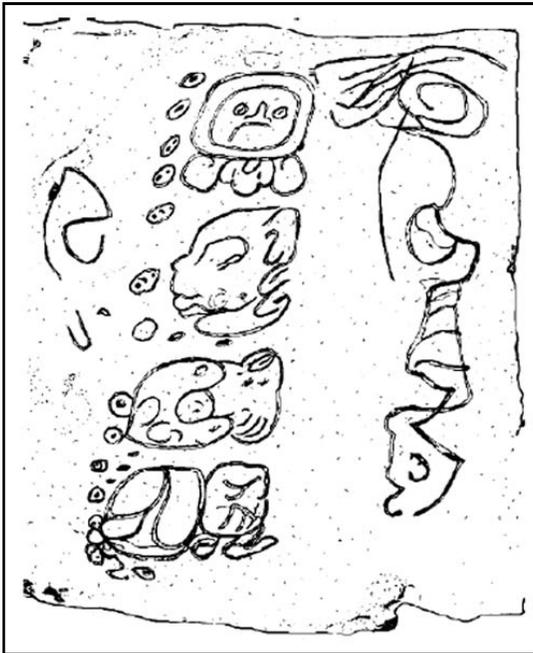
A line of monoliths at the El Caño site in central Panama

going through major political changes and population migrations. 800 miles to the north, the Classic Maya Period was ending and hundreds of cities were mysteriously abandoned. To the south, Moche culture had disappeared from the Peruvian coastline and the Wari people of the highlands were rising to regional power. Could El Caño's success have been part of those major geo-political events? Time and further excavation may tell. A surprise along those lines came when the gold from El Caño was analyzed. Natural impurities indicated it was mined at the site, not imported as completed pieces from farther south where cultures were supposedly more advanced. The people of El Caño may have lived in simple, perishable buildings, but they were clearly sophisticated when it came to gold smelting.

Mayo and her team appear to have a lot of work ahead of them. Judging from the size of the 260 foot diameter cemetery boundary, they estimate another 20 burials remain in the ground. If they are right, they might just be camping atop Panama's version of the Valley of the Kings.

Maya Exploration Center, in partnership with Midland College, will be leading an expedition to El Caño in April of 2011. If you're interested in joining us, check it out at http://www.mayaexploration.org/study_midland_apr12.php and contact us to inquire about remaining spaces on the trip.

The Comalcalco Brick... (continued from Page 1)



The Comalcalco Brick (drawing by Rafael Quevedo B.)

on Tortuguero Monument 6 (Gronemeyer and MacLeod 2010). His translation of the brick at the time was as follows:

4 Ajaaw, 3 Uniiw, hu-li, tzutz-jo-ma

If Boot's original, and tentative, reading is correct, then the text translates basically "4 Ajaaw 4 Uniiw arrives complete". Another translation of *tzutz* is "to end". The word *tzutzjom* is also found on Tortuguero Monument 6 qualifying the 13th Bak'tun reference and thus leading Boot to suggest a possible connection between the two texts. But with only a drawing to go from, he was not confident in his reading. Then after almost two years of searching, he finally found a photo in mid-November of 2011. Though still not available for public view, we at MEC have seen the photo and can confirm that the drawing was indeed accurate. Less than a week after Boot found the photo of the brick, INAH announced the existence of a second 2012 reference, neither mentioning Boot nor the tentative nature of his translation.

Erik Boot is an excellent epigrapher, but the crude style and eroded nature of the brick's text leaves it open to alternative interpretations. For example, in a July 2010 post to Aztlán, Mark Zender argued against the 3 Uniiw reading, suggesting 3 Xul as a better fit. Indeed, the animal head variant of that glyph is rare as a representation of the haab month K'ank'in (said as Uniiw in other Maya languages). The next glyph, first translated by European epigrapher Christian Prager, is widely accepted as *hu-li*, "he, she, it arrives". The final glyph clearly starts with *tzu-*, but the last symbols are debatable. While Boot suggests *jo-ma*, Zender opts for *k'ahk*, or "fire".

As Boot acknowledges, there is no long count associated with the Comalcalco brick. Alone, 4 Ajaaw 3 Uniiw could be placed in any century, as that combination occurs once every 52 years. Assuming it's the calendar round occurring in 2012 would be like finding a tombstone inscribed with "July 4th" and concluding it said "July 4th, 1776".

A final quandary to consider is who scrawled this crudely executed text and why? The brick itself is a simple construction supply, not a public monument. It would have been buried inside a temple wall and never seen. As noted earlier, it was one of hundreds of bricks with graffiti found at Comalcalco, bricks commonly thought to be the doodles of illiterate construction workers. Who then carved a phonetic text into this particular brick? Did a priest involved in the construction team do it? Were construction foreman literate nobles? More intriguing, why was it written at all? Clearly it's brief and not executed with any reverence. Would a text denoting the end of the long count calendar appear in such a banal context? Occam's razor would suggest that the "arrival" or "end" referred to would not be one over 1000 years into the future, but something pertinent to the workers who were drying the mud bricks, such as a date related to the construction of Comalcalco's temples. Two more reasonable dates for this 4 Ajaaw 3 Uniiw reference would be 9.11.9.4.0, November 14, 661 AD or 9.14.1.17.0, November 2, 713 AD. While the hunt for another reference to 2012 is certainly a worthy pursuit, we at MEC believe the Comalcalco brick is a dead end.

Kellogg's Massive Donation to Maya Culture

In an amazing turn of events, Dr. Francisco Estrada-Belli has turned what could have been a crushing lawsuit into a \$100,000 grant from the Kellogg Corporation. Back in July of this year, Kellogg informed the Maya Archaeology Initiative (MAI) that their logo was too similar to Froot Loops icon Toucan Sam and as such an infringement of their copyright. It was not only the image they contested, but the MAI logo's use of "Mayan Imagery".



Toucan Sam compared to MAI's logo

MAI, a non-profit that supports not just archaeology but also modern indigenous Maya families in Guatemala, decided to respond publicly to Kellogg's accusations. Dr. Francisco Estrada-Belli, President of MAI, Guatemalan national, and graduate of Boston University, began by saying, "This is a bit like the Washington Redskins claiming trademark infringement against the National Congress of American Indians." Then in a detailed response to the corporate giant, MAI counsel Sarah Mott explained that the two birds were nothing alike citing coloration, caricature, background, and general purpose. Addressing the assertion that Toucan Sam was somehow associated with Maya culture, Mott searched the Froot Loops website and responded, "There is nothing Mayan in the Froot Loops Adventure [online games]. Disturbingly, the villain in this Kellogg's Adventure - and the only character of color - is a "witch doctor" who cackles malevolently while stealing from children. At best,

this is culturally insensitive. I would characterize it as a demeaning caricature of an advanced and ancient civilization." In a later interview Dr. Estrada-Belli explained, "Kellogg's products are a staple in many Guatemalan households. We expect a brand that is so familiar to children to play a role in supporting cultural and racial understanding around the world, rather than undercutting it by promoting demeaning racial stereotypes."

For a few months the news was silent about Kellogg's attack on the small non-profit. Then in a joint statement issued on November 15th, 2011, Kellogg and MAI announced that Kellogg is making a \$100,000 donation to help MAI build a Maya Cultural Center in Guatemala's Peten rainforest. Kellogg will also be featuring major Maya accomplishments and a link to MAI's website on Kellogg's Froot Loop cereal boxes next year.

In a statement released on the MAI website, Dr. Estrada-Belli said, "We at Mai praise Kellogg for reaching out to us and help us build something that will positively improve the lives of many people of Guatemala by providing better education and a better future. We invite others to join us in this effort and help fund this project. Our goal is to raise \$300,000 to build the Maya Cultural Center in Melchor de Mencos Peten. In addition to exhibiting artifacts to illustrate Maya civilization from the surrounding sites, the center will illustrate the local wilderness, sustainability and efforts to protect this resource for all of humanity. This facility will be energy efficient and will serve as example for sustainable building practices. It will also include a conference room, library and a gift shop with books on the Maya and arts and crafts inspired by ancient artifacts and the rainforest. This center will be the cornerstone of our three-fold mission to provide better education, protect the Maya heritage and foster sustainable development in the region."

To learn more about MAI and how you can help, log on to their website at: www.mayaarchaeology.org

News From the Field

Cosmopolitan Teotihuacan

Another “international” neighborhood has been found in Teotihuacan, this time from the gulf coast of Veracruz. Earlier excavations at the Teopancazco barrio had hinted at a gulf coast enclave, but INAH archaeologist Linda Manzanilla has now confirmed it through strontium analysis of the skeletons found there. Teopancazco’s burials had long been recognized as Veracruz style, but now the strontium studies have demonstrated that those individuals grew up on a gulf coast diet. Needles, awls, shell buttons, fabric dyes, and residues of leather, feathers, and fur indicate that the neighborhood was a clothing production center where elaborate costumes for priests and warriors were made. This newly confirmed Veracruzano neighborhood joins the ranks of Maya, Oaxaca, and Michoacan enclaves at Teotihuacan and further strengthens the city’s identity as a truly cosmopolitan and commercial capital of ancient Mesoamerica.

Bonampak Murals Restored

Specialists from INAH have been hard at work this fall restoring the painted walls in Room 3 of Bonampak’s Temple of the Murals. Harsh salts have slowly covered the wall’s surface, obscuring its details, and repeated earthquakes have caused sections to fall away. The restoration has not only saved the painting, but continues to reveal previously unknown elements of the murals. New human figures, deities and hieroglyphic passages have now been recognized. INAH plans to eventually restore all three rooms and estimates the entire project will take 4-5 years.

2012 Tour Offerings from MEC



February 10-18, 2012

**Pillars of the Classic Maya -
Palenque to Tikal**

Led by Alonso Mendez



March 16-25, 2012

**Spring Equinox in the Yucatan -
Calendars and Astronomy**

Led by Dr. Michael Grofe



June 18-28, 2012

**Summer Solstice in Chiapas and the
Highlands of Guatemala**

Led by Dr. Christopher Powell



August 5-15, 2012

**Surfing the Zenith in the Maya
World, Guatemala and Honduras**

Led by Dr. Christopher Powell

Learn more about these tours at mayaexploration.org/tours.php

Chautauqua 2012 Courses

Spring Equinox in Bolivia, Tiwanaku and Lake Titicaca – March 17-21, 2012

Inti Raymi in Peru – Cuzco and Machu Picchu – June 16-25, 2012

The Paraca Desert and the Nazca Lines in Peru - July 6-11, 2012

Zenith Passage in the Temples of Ancient Java - October 9-16, 2012

www.ahatravel.com for all the details



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