

Archaeologists Unearth Key Maya Monuments

Archaeologists with the La Corona Regional Archaeological Project in Guatemala, who in 2012 discovered a Maya text containing only the second known reference to the so-called “end date” of the Maya calendar, today announced significant hieroglyphic finds during a press conference at the National Palace in Guatemala City.

One find consisted of a well-preserved Maya stela dating to the fifth century A.D. from the archaeological site of El Achiotal. *“This stela portrays an early king during one of the more poorly understood periods of ancient Maya history,”* says Marcello A. Canuto, director of Tulane’s Middle American Research Institute and co-director of the excavations at El Achiotal.

Since 2010, the project, partially supported by Pacunam Foundation, the US Department of Interior, and the National Geographic Society, has investigated La Corona and El Achiotal, sites previously ravaged by looters. *“We knew that this site played a significant role in the early history of the Classic lowland Maya. In fact, our excavations this year focused on an important building in the central plaza of the site,”* said Tomás Barrientos, director of the Department of Archaeology at Universidad del Valle de Guatemala and project co-director. *“Although the building was heavily damaged by looters, the stela was found well preserved, because the ancient Maya carefully placed it in an enclosed shrine sometime after it was broken,”* added Barrientos.

Supported by a National Geographic Young Explorers Grant, Tulane graduate student Luke Auld-Thomas is conducting his dissertation research at the site. Auld-Thomas originally planned to investigate the site’s earliest architecture. What he found, however, related to many centuries later, toward the end of the site’s history: *“We excavated the central axis of the building to expose one of the few undisturbed segments of the building and quickly uncovered a shrine that contained two fragments of the broken stela,”* says Auld-Thomas. *“What’s really amazing is that the Maya built a shrine to preserve the stela — and remarkably, continued to leave offerings there for generations afterward.”*

Expert epigrapher David Stuart of the University of Texas at Austin estimated the stela’s date to be November 22, A.D. 418. *“This was a time of great political upheaval in the central Maya area, when a Teotihuacan warrior-ruler named Siyaj K’ahk’ arrived in A.D. 378 and set up a new political order centered at Tikal. It seems that the Achiotal king came to power shortly after that time”* says Stuart.

So, besides individual accolades, this stela places the long reign and accomplishments of El Achiotal’s king into a larger historical framework. *“Based on parallels known from other sites, we think that this stela relates to this watershed event in Maya history — the installation, in the Maya lowlands, of a foreign power that can ultimately be traced to Teotihuacan. Indeed, although details of this event remain murky, this stela provides another piece of the Maya historical puzzle,”* says Canuto.

The La Corona team also found two more hieroglyphic panels in nearly pristine state. *“These panels are in near-perfect condition; they even have much of the original sparkling*

red paint preserved,” says Canuto. “Over the past decade, we have found over a dozen of these panels, and these reflect a skill and perfection in Maya stone work that is almost unique to La Corona,” he adds.

Tulane graduate student Maxime Lamoureux St-Hilaire discovered the panels in his excavations of La Corona’s palace. *“While my research focuses on architecture, we were digging in a beautifully built palace, so the odd chance of finding such pieces of art was always present in our mind.”*

Despite the heavy looting carried out in the buildings at the main plaza of La Corona, these panels escaped the ravages of looting because they were installed in a small unassuming bench in a corner room of the palace. *“What is curious about these panels is that they were removed from somewhere else at La Corona, perhaps a temple, and installed in this room at some later date,”* reflects Barrientos. *“It is clear that the ancient Maya relocated these panels for a special reason, giving them a new home in the royal residences. This is a pattern we have seen often at La Corona.”*

The panel inscriptions tell fascinating stories of rituals of kingly accession that involve travel, costuming, dancing, invocation of gods and reverence of ancestors. Stuart, who also deciphered the panels, states: *“The gorgeous hieroglyphs give us new insights about the ceremonies that led up to a new king being crowned. And they fill important gaps we had in La Corona’s rich history.”*

It is clear that these panels were important documents to the kings of La Corona, just as the stela was important to the ancient inhabitants of El Achiotal. *“The fact that the stela and these panels were preserved by the ancient Maya themselves — long after they were first carved — tells us how important it is to discover monuments in their original context. Knowing not only what these texts say but also that they were so vital to later generations adds a new wrinkle to our interpretation of how much the ancient Maya valued and strove to preserve their own history,”* says Canuto.

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