



# ARCHAEO MAYA

The Newsletter of Maya Exploration Center

[www.mayaexploration.org](http://www.mayaexploration.org)

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## Powell Appears on "Engineering An Empire"



*Christopher Powell, Peter Weller, and the History Channel film crew in Palenque*

On November 13, History Channel aired "Engineering an Empire: The Maya: Death Empire." Although the title had us worried, the documentary was a well-crafted piece about ancient Maya civilization. Following the great success of the series pilot, "Engineering an Empire: Rome," the network decided to green light the full series for the fall of 2006. For the on-site filming of the Maya episode, the producers chose Palenque. Series host, Peter Weller, sprang energetically up and down the temple steps, eloquently explaining how Palenque was designed and constructed. Famous for his starring roles in "Robocop" and "Buckaroo Banzai," Weller has since obtained a doctorate in Renaissance Art and currently teaches at Syracuse University. Much of the script was his creative work.

Christopher Powell appeared in a number of scenes, presenting information about Palenque's architecture, ruling dynasty, and eventual decline. His research on the sacred geometry of Maya temples was prominently featured in the show. Joining Powell was a role call of leading Maya archaeologists, including William Fash, Simon Martin, Stephen Houston, and Rafael Cobos.

Their articulate explanations, combined with excellent graphics, dramatic recreations, and Weller's enthusiasm, made for one of the most engaging Maya documentaries to have come along in years.

Despite the show's harsh subtitle, "The Maya: Death Empire," the sublime aspects of Maya culture were also brought to light. Upon hearing the title for the first time, Powell commented, "Death Empire? I was talking about their love of flowers!" As always, his enthusiasm and knowledge came across well on film and MEC is proud of his involvement in this latest documentary.

To learn when History Channel will be airing the program next, log on to their website at [www.history.com](http://www.history.com) and follow the links to "Engineering an Empire."



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## Letter from the Director

Though fall is normally the season when things slow down a bit for MEC, such was not the case this year! University speaking engagements, documentary film crews, travel courses, and a NASA educational workshop in Palenque kept us running right through November. You'll read about it all in this issue of ArchaeoMaya, beginning with Christopher Powell's appearance on the History Channel.



I was on the move for a solid month, guest lecturing at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, leading the Midland College Day of the Dead travel course in the Peten, speaking at the NASA workshop in Palenque, and finally traveling to the University of Cincinnati to present at a colloquium on ancient Maya mathematics. During my brief stay in Palenque this fall, I obtained some raw latex, and following traditional methods, managed to create a dozen rubber balls, too small for playing the ancient game but good enough for entertaining toddlers. More on that as my experiments continue....

On page four of this issue, you'll read a full description of the NASA conference and workshop. Alonso Mendez is one of the chief organizers,

and we couldn't be more proud of his involvement. MEC plans to continue its support for this educational program, which hopefully will be replicated at major pre-Columbian sites throughout America.

Also in this issue you'll find the Origin Story of Maximon, the popular saint of Santiago Atitlan. The story was told to us during one of our travel courses last summer, and I'm pleased to share it with you here.

In spare moments between the exciting activities of this fall, I've been working hard to keep up with requests for educational programs in 2007. With new research projects, seven study abroad courses, and a host of public tours, 2007 is shaping up to be our busiest year ever.

As the year draws to an end, we are thankful first and foremost for the support of over 1000 people who receive this newsletter. Ultimately, MEC's success is measured by the value you place in our research and education programs. For your continued interest and involvement, we are deeply grateful. Please enjoy this edition of ArchaeoMaya and have a wonderful holiday season!

Sincerely,



Maya Exploration Center is now registered with MissionFish, a creative new way for non-profits to receive donations through what people buy and sell on Ebay. Sellers and buyer can name non-profits as their preferred charities and a portion of their sales or payments go to those charities.

If you sell on Ebay and would like to name MEC as your preferred charity, you can find the program on Ebay through the "[Ebay Giving Works](#)" Links.

## Midland College in the Peten for Day of the Dead

MEC's October travel course in the Peten offered a rare blend of culture and ecology. Fifteen students from Midland College, Texas, spent an intense week visiting Maya sites, observing Day of the Dead, and studying the tropical environment of northern Guatemala. Dr. Margaret Wade, the Midland College professor who requested the course, enthusiastically shared her knowledge of rainforest ecosystems. Ed Barnhart stressed the remarkable achievements of the Maya people who adapted to and flourished in this teeming world.

The island of Flores, on Lake Peten Itza, was the ideal base for exploring past and present. Beneath its winding streets and hilltop church lie the remains of Noj Peten, capital of the last Itza kings. Over the next few days, Ed Barnhart led tours to the remote sites of Yaxha and Siebal. The river trip to Siebal's deserted ruins gave participants a chance to experience the untamed jungle.

During field excursions around the lake, course participants used Dr. Wade's equipment to test the quality of the water, key to the survival of the area's natural resources. But the lake's most famous underwater treasure is *Chak Tzimin*, a statue of the mythologized horse brought by Cortez that rises from the depths during the full moon.

Human souls return to earth on November 1, Day of the Dead. The celebration began with a morning walk through the busy Santa Elena market, where the group discovered the Peten version of jack-o-lanterns - hollow grapefruits carved with skeletal faces. The market stalls spilled with arrays of local candies, which everyone purchased for the evening's festivities.



At sunset, the group set off across the lake to the town of San José, home of the last seven Itza Maya speakers. Only on Day of the Dead, the villagers there carry three venerated human skulls through the streets, stopping at each house to receive offerings of fruit, bread, and *atole*. At evening mass, the three skulls sat prominently on the church altar. Afterwards, just one of the skulls was paraded through the town. Invited to join both the mass and procession, our tour members enjoyed doling out candy to the laugh-



Midland College group and Holgar Aguillo in Uaxactun's Group E

ing children, who were gaily singing the Peten version of "Trick or Treat": "*Hispasa pa' la calavera. Si no me das, te da cagatera!*" ("Corn atole for the skulls. If you don't give it to me, it will give you the runs!") With laughter ringing on the water, the group boated back to Flores by the light of the full moon.

Warmed by the friendliness of the local people, the Midland students were amply prepared for next day's trip to Uaxactun. After viewing the fine collection of Maya ceramics housed in the modern Maya village that has sprouted up amongst the ancient ruins, they explored the Group E astronomical complex. The village's dirt roads with still full of children chanting, "*Hispasa pa' la calavera.*" Just as diverting was an encounter with a young athlete who was learning to play the ancient Maya ball game. Rounds of picture-taking later, the group headed for the hotel at Tikal National Park.

At dawn, everyone watched the sunrise from the 65-meter height of Temple IV. Though it rained on and off throughout the day, they cheerfully braved the weather and saw as much of the ancient city as their legs would allow.

One last adventure was to be had. The following morning, at the entrance to the national park, the bravest strapped on harnesses and took a zip line tour through the jungle canopy. As they soared through the trees, Texan hoots and hollers filled the jungle air. An hour later they were at the airport for the long journey home. Back in Midland, plans are in the works for travel courses in the Guatemalan highlands and Peru.

## NASA Returns to Palenque for a View of the Nadir Sun

By Alonso Mendez

NASA scientists usually direct their focus toward solving the mysteries of deep space. Heroic endeavors like landing a man on the moon, launching communication satellites, or probing the distant reaches of our solar system have changed our world and our view of the cosmos. Despite these amazing advances, passion for the sciences is flickering out. Gone are the days when every child wanted to be an astronaut or rocket scientist. Huddled in darkened caves before the glowing TV set, venturing off to hunt for food in the nearest Walmart freezer, young people are insulated from the great celestial cycles that haunted our ancestors. In an effort to make astronomy more relevant, NASA has made an unorthodox move. The space agency, in cooperation with UC Berkeley, has turned its attention homeward, to explore the astronomical achievements of ancient world cultures.



*Mendez observes nadir sunrise at the Temple of the Inscriptions*

The program is the brainchild of astronomer Dr. Isabel Hawkins, Director of the Center for Science Education and Space Sciences Laboratory. Her staff has brought

together archaeologists, archaeoastronomers, anthropologists, and educators for a three-year project, *El Sol Nos Une A Todos* (We are One Under The Sun). Designed to awaken a lasting interest and appreciation for science, mathematics, and technology, the program emphasizes the rich legacy of indigenous scientific knowledge found in the New World.

Initiated on Maya soil, this program was successfully field-tested at Palenque during the summer solstice of 2005. During this year's May zenith passage, observed at Merida and Uxmal in Yucatan, 1500 students and teachers attended.

On November 1, the Day of the Dead, the team convened at Palenque. Speak-

ers included Isabel Hawkins; researchers Russ Bodnar and G.B. Cornucopia from Chaco Canyon, New Mexico; Yucatec Maya archaeologist Pepe Huchim; Rodrigo de la Torre Yarza and Aciel Sanchez, from Monte Albán; and Palenque archaeologist, Alfonso Morales, director of the newly formed Cultural Council of Palenque. Alonso Mendez, one of the main program organizers, lectured on astronomy at Palenque. Ed Barnhart gave a cogent talk on Uxactun's Group E complex. Lorena Harp of Oaxaca demonstrated the use of solar ovens.

The two-day mini-conference prepared educators who would lead a three-day science workshop for primary and secondary school teachers. The workshops involved practical, interactive exercises supported by teaching materials suitable for classroom use. Visits to the ruins provided tangible evidence for the advanced scientific knowledge of the ancient Palencanos.

The NASA event coincided with a full moon, a rare Mercury transit, and the nadir passage, the time when the sun passes through the center of the underworld. Thanks to INAH, scholars had the privilege of



*Isabelle Hawkins with Palenque teachers*

## NASA Returns Cont.

conducting observations at dawn and dusk over a five-day period as well as the chance of comparing solar and lunar alignments at different Native American sites. The most dramatic observation was the sighting of the full moon rising and setting over the Palace in the same arc as the sun at zenith passage. A Discovery Atlas crew was there to film the alignments. As it had 1200 years ago, Palenque once more breathed in the excited discussion of astronomy and science.



*Newly appointed President of Oxchuc Maria Gloria Sancez Gomez with Louise Myer of Solar Household Energy demonstrating the use of a solar cooking pot.*

Astronomy depends on an expansive vision that touches our lives when, scanning the night skies, we become introspective and consider our place in the universe. Surely ancient peoples asked the same questions and experienced the same sense of awe. Gazing outward and looking within we may reach a deeper understanding of where we came from and formulate wiser decisions of where we wish to go.

## 2007 Mayan Calendars

2007 Maya Calendars are now available through MEC. This year's theme is images from Maya pottery and features the roll out photography of Justin Kerr. Each month has the long count date at the top and each day has the tzolkin-haab calendar round.



A donation of \$25 to MEC covers both the calendar and shipping. Follow the link below to donate online or send a check to our offices in Austin. Our quantities are limited, so order yours today!

[www.mayaexploration.org/support\\_donate.php](http://www.mayaexploration.org/support_donate.php)

## Barnhart Speaks at Universities

Interest in MEC's traveling lecture program has been growing. Dr. Barnhart was invited to two speaking engagements this fall. In October he spent three days at Indiana University of Pennsylvania as a guest speaker in their Latin American Studies Department's lecture series. In addition to addressing the classrooms of Professors Caleb Finnegan, Lydia Rodriguez, and Francisco Alacron, he presented a public lecture on ancient Maya history in the university's student center. Though the conference room was meant to hold 60 people, over 100 students showed up, a pleasant surprise for organizers of the series.

In mid-November, Barnhart presented a colloquium on ancient Maya mathematics at the University of Cincinnati. Students and faculty listened intently as he explained the Maya system of numeration, the calendrical cycles, and the latest discoveries in Maya archaeoastronomy. During his three-day visit, he also met with professors Paul Jones, George Sucharieh, and Muthar Al-Ubaidi to discuss developing a study abroad course for the university's Honors Program. Both visits were well received, resulting in invitations to give more presentations and requests to conduct new MEC travel courses.

## News from Palenque

**Oldest Mesoamerican Writing?**

This fall *Science* reported that the earliest example of writing in the Americas was found in 1999, within a road construction backfill pile in Veracruz, Mexico. Dubbed the Cascajal Block, the flat basalt stone, about the size of a laptop, contains 62 carved symbols on its surface. Said to date back 2900 years, it is believed to have come from an Olmec site. Stephen Houston, one of the lead researchers quoted in *Science*, has confirmed both the date and the nature of the text. But the published evidence raises two main concerns. Firstly, the provenience of the object is lost and its context, described by the construction worker who found the stone, is uncertain. Secondly, the arrangement of the symbols is unusual for a Mesoamerican text. Every known example of Mesoamerican writing, Olmec or otherwise, is arranged in a grid pattern; in contrast, the symbols on the Cascajal Block are randomly arranged in clusters. Without similar texts, a known provenience, or the possibility for secure dating, its identification as Mesoamerica's earliest writing is premature in the eyes of some scholars. Hopefully, the site from which it was unearthed can be rediscovered, and formal excavations can put this incredible find in context.

**Big Plans for El Mirador**

The United States Department of the Interior has signed a ten-year agreement with the Guatemalan government to help protect and develop the cultural and ecological treasures of the El Mirador National Park. The pre-Classic Maya site of El Mirador, whose giant pyramids are the tallest structures in the

## The Origin Story of Maximon

*Among the Maya of Guatemala and southern Chiapas, Maximon is a highly venerated native saint. His divine powers and personality bear a striking resemblance to the ancient Maya Earthlord, who owns all the earth's treasures and metes out blessings and curses arbitrarily. According to legend, Maximon and his cult originated on the shores of Lake Atitlan, Guatemala. Juan Patal Majzul, a Kakchiquel Maya who grew up in the area, told this tale of Maximon's origins to my travel course in Panajachel one evening in July 2006.*

Long ago, in the town of Santiago Atitlan, many people were getting sick and dying from *susto* (supernatural fright) and other illnesses caused by witches. The witches were transforming themselves into animals in order to scare and attack people's souls.

The village wise men got together and decided to enlist the aid of the Mam, or Great Grandfather. They went into the forest and asked the trees for permission to make a mask of the Mam. The first two trees said no, the responsibility was too great, but the Tz'ite tree said ok. The villagers came and with much ceremony, chopped down the tree. As the mask was carved, each cut of the machete was accompanied by chants and song. When the mask was complete, a woman arrived and offered everyone chocolates and bread. As they ate it, the people realized that she had tricked them. They were eating cow dung! Instead of getting angry, they started laughing, because it was funny and because it meant they had found the Mam.

Then the woman put on the mask and transformed herself into Maximon. The elders asked her to destroy all the witches. This she did by going



*Maximon's image in Santiago Atitlan*

through the town, switching into a young man, then a young woman, with lightning speed. She tracked down the witches until she killed every last one. But Maximon was too powerful. He started convincing the young to do dangerous and immoral things. So, the elders changed his statue. They moved the mask from the front to the side of his face and broke off his arms and legs. Thus, the saint lost some of his power.

Today, the image of Saint Maximon is found in villages all around the Guatemala Highlands and Chiapas. Like the Earthlord, Maximon is often dressed as a rich Ladino in fine Western clothes. A smoldering cigarette always dangles from his mouth. In Santiago Atitlan he wears more a traditional Maya costume. Worshippers ask Maximon for favors, good and bad, by offering him money, liquor, and tobacco. All the children in Santiago Atitlan know where Maximon is housed and will happily lead you there. If you do visit his shrine, be careful what you ask for, because Maximon knows what you've done and may decide to punish you instead of granting your wish.

News from Palenque Cont.

Americas, will be the project's centerpiece. Funding will come primarily from the Global Heritage Fund, a non-governmental agency that has promised to donate millions of dollars over the next decade. A new visitor's center is the first order of business, and construction will be underway as soon as the rainy season ends. Dr. Richard Hansen, Director of the El Mirador Project for over 20 years, says this new initiative will not only protect the ruins, but also the region's endangered environment. "The preservation effort will only happen with economic justification. The people of this region and this country have to know that saving what we have found here is financially more productive than slashing, burning, looting, and unlawful logging. Science for the sake of science does no good for people. We are creating hope for people who have none," says Hansen. In this case, hope will come in the form of increased tourism and the jobs it will create. Tikal National Park, which currently brings in over \$200 million annually in tourism-related revenue, is a model the project is eager to emulate. Only time will tell if they can draw large numbers of tourists to the heart of one of the most remote rain forests left on the planet.

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Upcoming Tours

**Maya Ruins and Culture in Chiapas, January 26 - February 2, 2007**  
**Cacao and the Ancient Maya of Southern Mexico, February 19- March 2, 2007**  
 Learn the details and sign up at [www.mayaexploration.org/tours.php](http://www.mayaexploration.org/tours.php)

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**Cynthia Smith • Vern Wade • Kana Honda and Daniel Choi • Catherine Considine • Jay Tropianskia • Bruce and Kathryn Walker • Nicole Joniec**

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