



ARCHAEO MAYA

The Newsletter of Maya Exploration Center

www.mayaexploration.org

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Computers for the Maya Youth of Yaxalum

Over the past three years, MEC has formed a growing bond with Yaxalum, a non-profit Maya educational and environmental organization based in the remote mountain town of Yajalon, Chiapas. The institution sponsors a variety of sustainable projects, including organic coffee production and the use of alternative low-tech resources. Yaxalum also provides scholarships and dormitory space for young men and women from rural areas who wish to continue their education. Without this support, Maya teenagers would never have a chance to attend the regional high schools located in Yajalon. In a sense, students living in the dorms are luckier than most: they participate in environmental programs, are encouraged to maintain their language and culture, and occasionally have contact with students from foreign lands.

As readers may recall, MEC's ongoing relationship with Yaxalum began when the American School of London was searching for an institution where English high school students could volunteer their services and connect with Maya teenagers. As it turned out, ASL and Yaxalum students have shared music and meals, played basketball, and worked together painting the girl's dormitory and building ecologically friendly wood-burning stoves. In between, Alonso Mendez has introduced students to ancient Maya astronomy and history while MEC coordinator Anita Smart has provided Yaxalum staff with invaluable administrative guidance.

Alas, Yaxalum's long-standing financial support has dried up even as their list of needs grows. At the top of the list, above



Satellite dish being installed at the Yaxalum Dormitories

funds for student scholarships and infrastructure, is communication with the outside world – computers and wi-fi access.

In response to this need, MEC organized its first fundraiser, held at the Mexic-Arte Museum, in Austin, Texas, on November 10. During the evening, Dr. Barnhart presented a 10-minute video about Yaxalum, produced by Sarah Daggett and Anita Smart. Photos of Yaxalum and the exotic Tzeltal Maya area of Chiapas were on display. And guests were treated to superb Mexican food.

MEC will continue its fundraising efforts via email. All tax-deductable contributions will go toward buying laptops and providing monthly satellite services for the Yaxalum dormitories. If readers would care to add to the number of used laptops already donated, please mail them in.

MEC's first fundraiser has strengthened our commitment to community outreach in the Maya region; in this case, helping the internet do what it was designed to do – give people access to information and bring them closer together.



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Letter from the Director



These are certainly interesting times to be a Mayanist! MEC's phone has been ringing off the hook with questions about 2012. Just in the last month, I appeared on Fox News, and Christopher Powell spoke to ABC Nightline. We are doing our best to explain that there is no Maya doomsday prophecy, but it seems our words are still falling on fear-deafened ears. We'll keep at it! This issue of ArchaeoMaya relates some of the work we've been doing to set the record straight and why much of what is being said about the coming end of days is flat out wrong. I encourage our readers not to be afraid of the future but rather to keep their feet firmly planted, along with us, in the ever-changing present.

As you will read in our lead article, MEC is currently working toward a better future for modern Maya people. From the beginning, I hoped that MEC would be a source of support and empowerment for modern Maya communities. We are now doing just that for Maya youth who live in the Yashalum dormitories in Yajalon, Chiapas. When we asked the kids and program administrators what they most needed, they requested internet access for their hill-top dormitory. Last summer we helped fund a satellite dish and now we are collecting used laptops and funds for operating systems. Please contact us if you would like to contribute.

As 2009 comes to a close and the holidays begin, I count our blessings that MEC has weathered the global eco-

conomic storm. There were months when we hung on by our fingernails, but we made ends meet and 2010 is looking up. I want to express my gratitude to those schools who continued their travel programs with us in 2009, even in the face of the media's misrepresentation of Mexico's drug wars and swine flu epidemic. You can read about the latest adventure of one of our strongest partners, Midland College, in this issue of ArchaeoMaya.

The holidays are upon us again, the season of giving. While planning your gift list, please don't forget all the ways in which you can support MEC. One of the easiest ways, without spending a single extra penny, is to do your Amazon.com gift shopping through our internet portal. Simply by entering Amazon through the links on our website, every purchase you make gives 5% to MEC. That's not just the books on our list, but anything and everything you order. See the ad in the back of this issue for the link. You might also consider giving the gift of a MEC Research Membership to the Mayanists on your list. They would gain JSTOR access to over 250 online journal archives, 10% off all MEC travel programs, and a 2010 Mayan Calendar. Remember that all forms of support for MEC, be they memberships, tour participation, or private donations come with a tax-deductible receipt.

Wherever you spend the upcoming holidays, and however your interests have led you into MEC's growing community, we wish you peace and happiness. Thanks for your continued interest in our research and education programs. We wouldn't exist without you!

Happy Holidays!

Midland Students Journey to the Source of Life

Midland College's October study course brought nine adventurous souls to Tabasco and Chiapas for an intense immersion in the natural world surrounding the ancient sites of the Maya and Zoque peoples. Under the guidance of biology professor Margaret Wade and MEC research associate Alonso Mendez, the Texas students focused on a vital question: the relationship between ancient peoples and their environment. A nighttime visit to the famous Villa Luz Cave, within the lush ecological preserve of Kolem Jaa, provided a fascinating answer.



Midland College students on a jungle trek at Kolem Jaa

As one of the earth's rare lithotrophic biospheres, Villa Luz Cave is the catalyst for much of the rich biological life of the Tabasco sierras. Lithotrophs are those wondrous microbes and plant organisms that convert inorganic substrates such as limestone into chemicals needed to sustain life. This amazing feat of biosynthesis takes place in the primeval darkness of Villa Luz Cave. Great mats of lithotrophs proliferate around sulfurous vents, and these chemoautotrophic communities of sulfur-oxidizing bacteria produce not only byproducts of sulfuric acid, but also serve as the primary food for more complex organisms.

The myriad creatures that inhabit this cave – flying insects, arachnids, pseudo-scorpions, bats, and even raccoons – form symbiotic relationships with the life-giving bacteria. The most curious and significant member of this diverse ecosystem is the blind Astyanax Mexicanus Jordani, a small cave tetra that abounds in the bacteria-rich environment.

Since pre-Columbian times, this rare little fish has been part of the diet, lore, and rituals of the Zoque people. After the governor of Tabasco, Tomas Garrido Canabal, banned these rites, in the early 20th century, he built a lavish spa whose renowned mineral waters drew the rich and famous. When the plush oasis faded, the Zoques started harvesting the "minnows" again and revived their ancient celebration, which is held during Holy Week. Accompanied by drummers, flute players, and an elder shaman, dancers dressed in white carry baskets of flowers and candles to the mouth of the cavern where they offer prayers to the spirit of the cave and to Chaac, the rain god, for permission to harvest the minnows. Afterwards, the pilgrims enter the cave with buckets of paste made from the beaten roots of a tropical vine, called *barbasco* (*tephrosia toxicofera*), mixed with lime. The plant's toxic effects cause the stunned minnows to float to the surface where they are scooped up in baskets. The festival attracts thousands, who come to partake of the bounty of nature and bathe in the healing waters of Kolem Jaa. And so, the tradition survives, along with the life that defies the cave's deadly gases.

This ancient biosphere, which begins with an extraordinary form of bacterial life, links the dank underworld to the vivid world in which we live. In subtle ways the hidden ecosystem of Villa Luz Cave conveys the complex relationship of humans to the primordial plant and animal kingdoms.



Upcoming Public Tours

Pillars of the Classic Maya, Palenque to Tikal

April 17-25, 2010

Learn the details and sign up at www.mayaexploration.org/tours.php

2012: The End of Rumors

With all the rumors flying around about 2012 and the end of the world, the media has been doing a great job at catering to the public's worst fears. True, anything can happen in the unforeseeable future. But for people without the defense mechanism of skepticism on their side – sleepless fourth graders afraid for their lives – the 2012 story ceases to be just another media ploy. The aim of this article is to address some of the ludicrous theories ricocheting in the air and to give readers a good reason to doubt that 2012 will be different from any other year in our unpredictable corner of the galaxy.

The most alarming prophesies – solar flares, speeding asteroids, a flip in Earth's magnetic poles – hover at the outer reaches of dim possibility. Each prediction begins with a small nugget of scientific truth and then spins out of control into the twilight zone. Here is the real scoop on the top five 2012 disaster scenarios that don't hold flood water:

Solar Flares. What are they? Not those Internet images of fire balls hurtling towards Earth. NASA, which has been monitoring solar flares for years, has determined that they ebb and flow over an 11-year cycle. In 2012 the cycle should be at peak intensity. That sounds bad. But if we keep in mind that solar flares can erupt from any spot on the great sphere of our Sun, the statistical likelihood of a flare shooting directly towards Earth is remote. Besides, the Sun is 100 million miles away! A flare, which begins as a visible plume of fiery gas, quickly dissipates into a gust of solar radiation. The Earth's magnetic field protects us from that radiation, but even if we were exposed, the impact would be minimal. Repeated doses of radiation can cause cancer and lower life expectancy, but no one would die suddenly. Flares would pose a danger to communication satellites orbiting outside the magnetic field, but a solar flare of sufficient magnitude to destroy them has never been recorded. HBO would be off line for a while, but humankind would survive.

Celestial alignments, predicted for December 2012, will cause gravitational disruption and natural disasters. Although some Internet sites say seven planets will be lining up in a row, any astronomer can tell you there will be no planetary alignments in December. Even if the planets were to align, nothing catastrophic would befall humankind. In 1962 a rare planetary conjunction was accompanied by a solar eclipse. Nothing happened. The other planets in our solar system are simply too far away to have any significant gravitational effect on Earth.

The much-heralded alignment of the Earth, the Sun, and the "Galactic Center" will take place on December 21, 2012 – just as it has on every winter solstice for the last 20 years. This alignment, imperceptible to the naked eye, is caused by the precession of the equinoxes, which moves our view of the stars one degree every 72 years. The alignment of the Sun with the dead center of the Milky Way occurred in 1996. If it were going to influence the Earth, it would have happened already. Again, the distances are simply too vast to have an effect on us.

A rogue planet or large asteroid is feared to hit the Earth in 2012. The rogue planet Nibiru, widely discussed on the Internet, does not exist. A century ago, astronomers posited a Planet X (a tenth planet) because of unexplained mathematical errors in calculating the orbit of Neptune. The range of telescopic equipment increased, but no Planet X was ever found. Then Voyager II passed Neptune in 1993, recalculated its orbit, and answered the mathematical quandary. Still, thousands of people believe Nibiru is swinging back from its incredibly wide orbit and heading our way.

As for asteroids racing in our direction, 900-foot-wide Apophis is the best possibility. The chances of collision are estimated at 1 in 250,000, and its next approach is in 2029. Many Internet sites suggest that the government is hiding the facts about Nibiru or a mega-asteroid, but most astronomical data reported today is coming from independent scientists, not government agencies. Heck, an object bound to impact Earth three years from now could be seen with a good backyard telescope!

What if the Earth's magnetic poles flip in 2012? Geomagnetic studies verify that it has happened before and that Earth is overdue for another. When it happens, the Earth's magnetic field will drop to zero for a time, exposing the planet to solar radiation. Sounds terrible, but let's not dig the bunkers yet. The last magnetic pole shift happened 750,000 years ago, and there is no evidence that it caused catastrophes or mass extinctions. During pole shifts, it's the polarity that switches, not the Earth itself up-ending. Most soothing of all is that, from beginning to end, a pole shift takes some 10,000 years. When magnetic north starts drifting way off the top of the Earth, our compasses will stop working. If this isn't happening today, it won't be happening three years from now.

2012: The End of Rumors (cont.)

New Age fans of the Harmonic Convergence are convinced that the frequency of the Earth is rising and that something monumental will happen when it reaches 13 Hz. Some say the Earth will stop spinning. Bad! Others say the frequency of human brain waves will sync up with the Earth's resonance, expanding our consciousness. Super! But wait, who said the frequency is increasing? None other than New Age author Gregg Braden in his 1997 book, *Awakening to Zero Point*. His revelation came from an electrical shock he received while camping in the Sinai in 1987. Braden's pseudo-scientific work claims that the Schumann Resonance Frequency of the Earth will rise from its standard of 8 Hz to 13 Hz by 2012. Why jump from 8 to 13? Because the Fibonacci Sequence does. What the two have to do with each other Braden doesn't explain.

Winfried Otto Schumann, a German physicist who studied global electromagnetic resonance in the 1950's, determined a range of distinct peaks at extremely low frequencies (ELF). With a base mode of 7.83 Hz, the Schumann Resonance may fluctuate into higher frequencies during brief electrical changes in the cavity between the Earth's surface and the ionosphere. Apart from transient oscillations caused by lightning and earthquakes, Earth's resonance frequency does not increase! That is because Schumann's formula is based on two constants: the speed of light divided by the circumference of the Earth. The Northern California Earthquake Data Center has observed "no unusual change

or drift since the start of observations in 1995."

Finally, let's turn to the reputed source of prophecies about 2012: the ancient Maya calendar. While it is true that December 21, 2012 marks the end of a grand cycle in the Long Count calendar, none of the thousands of Maya hieroglyphic texts says a word about disasters, new ages of enlightenment, or the end of time. The prevailing notion that the Maya calendar must reset in 2012 may stem from confusion between a "world age" and a "cycle of time." Maya myth tells us that the third Creation lasted 13 Bak'tuns. But that is not to say that the present world age will also last 13 Bak'tuns. The Aztecs made it clear that each previous age lasted a different length of time, much like the Greek, Roman, and Hindu cycles. Western interpreters have conflated the steady rhythm of the Long Count calendar with the more fluid paradigm of world ages.

One thing is certain: the Maya regarded the turns of katuns and bak'tuns as times of renewal and transformation. Just as the Aztecs held the New Fire Ceremony at the end of each 52-year cycle, the ancient Maya viewed the end of major Long Count cycles as times for new beginnings. If the ancient Maya could witness the current crop of doomsayers wringing their hands over the arrival of the 13th Bak'tun, they would probably be dismayed. Inevitably, changes were to be ushered in through dedicated action, sacrifice, and joyful celebration.



The Maya Calendar on your iPhone
available on iTunes



2010 Wall Calendars available at
www.mayan-calendar.com

Proceeds go to support Maya Exploration Center, a 501(c)3 Corporation

News From the Field

[Clovis Man in Mexico](#)

A team of archaeologists from INAH and the University of Arizona has uncovered the most extensive Clovis site ever found in Mexico. The site has been named El Fin del Mundo, denoting its remote location in the desert region of northern Mexico, some 70 km outside of Hermosillo. The Paleolithic hunter-gatherers who inhabited this now desolate area left behind some 300 artifacts; most notably, a number of Clovis points, made of white quartz and white flint, dating to around 11,000 BCE. Apparently the nomadic bands roamed far and wide. It was the momentous discovery of sophisticated Clovis spear points outside Clovis, New Mexico, during the 1920s, which confirmed the presence of humans in the New World over 13,000 years ago. Perhaps equally dramatic finds await discovery at "The End of the World."

[Decapitated Skulls Found in Cuzco](#)

Peruvian archaeologists have found three decapitated skulls in a ceremonial vessel buried in the ruins of Sacsayhuaman, the monolithic Inca fortress that dominates the city of Cuzco. In all likelihood, the heads belonged to warriors or chiefs who were enemies of the Inca. Archaeologists, who are now searching for the associated bodies at the Qowicarana Ridge in Sacsayhuaman, believe the sacrifice took place during the last phase of the Inca Empire, under the reign of Inca Huayna Capac. The three skulls provide irrefutable proof that ritual decapitation was part of Inca culture right up until European contact.

Claude Lévi-Strauss: A Man Beyond Nature



Lévi-Strauss during his Brazil fieldwork in the 1930's

Claude Lévi-Strauss, the eminent French anthropologist, died in early November, at the age of 100. He lived long enough to see his ideas transform the way Western societies view primitive peoples. In his youth, aboriginal cultures, whether peaceful or warlike, were perceived as wild. Lévi-Strauss's fieldwork in Brazil and his subsequent book, *The Savage Mind*, changed all that. He regarded the hunter-gatherers of the rainforest as deeply knowledgeable and imaginative observers of the natural world. More than satisfying their basic needs for food and shelter, they were seeking thoughtful answers to fundamental questions: our place in the universe and the meaning of life and death.

While the cultural vanguard of his day became absorbed in Primitive Art, Lévi-Strauss concentrated his intellectual powers on Native American myths. With scientific precision, he discovered layers of complexity in tales about honey and tobacco that surpassed the dualities of good and evil. *The Raw and the Cooked* and *From*

Honey to Ashes reveal the underlying themes and models by which people live. In his search for a science of mythology, Lévi-Strauss looked for similarities rather than differences among ancient and modern cultures, concluding that myth-making is governed by universal laws or constructs that all humanity shares.

During the 1960s, structuralism reigned in universities, and Lévi-Strauss became a hero of the counter-cultural rebellion against the materialism of Western civilization. Twenty years later he was vilified as a hopeless romantic by a new wave of French philosophers, the deconstructivists, who soon revamped the fields of literature and anthropology. Lévi-Strauss's critics argued that he had not paid enough attention to the role of history and writing in the development of civilization and that his theories were based on inadequate fieldwork. Now fieldwork has become a questionable pursuit, because of its lack of objectivity. James Clifford, author of *Writing Culture*, goes so far to say that anthropology is merely a sub-genre of travel writing.

Lévi-Strauss's works are dazzling products of acute analyses, intricate speculation, and poetic reflection. His radical ideas have become commonplace in a world where primitivism has become fashion and "going native" is a vacationer's dream. Through all the intellectual upheavals of the past fifty years, Lévi-Strauss's reputation remains intact: a giant thinker who regarded native peoples as giant thinkers, like himself. He will be missed.



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