



ARCHAEO MAYA

The Newsletter of Maya Exploration Center

www.mayaexploration.org

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New Discovery Channel Series Stars Kirk French

Beginning on Tuesday, February 22 at 10 PM ET, MEC Research Associate Dr. Kirk French will co-host Discovery Channel's new series, **AMERICAN TREASURES**. The archaeologist and documentary filmmaker will have the cameras focused on him as he and his friend Dr. Jason De León drive across country investigating the history behind everyday artifacts.

The concept came about because the two professors often receive inquiries from people who think they possess items of historical significance. For the show, Kirk and Jason hit the road during school breaks to examine these unique artifacts: a Colt revolver that supposedly belonged to famed outlaw John Wesley Hardin, a brass trumpet that Louis Armstrong may have played, and a safe thought to hold the business papers of Al Capone.

Tooling around the country in their trusty pickup truck, French and De León conduct hands-on research into each artifact, consulting with experts to learn more about the item and its historical and cultural context: what it is, where it came from, who made it, and why. Occasionally they meet up with fellow archaeologists to learn about important scientific research going on across the United States. The fun loving pair break down the stereo-types of professors in the ivory academic towers, instead venturing out to talk to regular Americans about their seemingly impossible discoveries.

Jason De León has conducted archaeo-



French and DeLeon on the road for American Treasures (photo from Discovery.com)

logical and ethnographic research in Mexico and is now studying migrant populations in the US. A professor at the University of Michigan, he teaches cultural anthropology, the anthropology of Americana, and the anthropology of rock and roll. "Culture isn't just something that you read about in textbooks or have to travel to distant lands to find," De León says. "AMERICAN TREASURES is about exploring different aspects of American culture through people, their stories, and through artifacts."

French, who teaches Mesoamerican history and culture at Penn State, has a slightly different take on the series. As an archaeologist, his main focus is on the interplay between humans and their environment. "A common misconception the public has of archaeologists is that we look for treasure," he says. "Archaeologists do not look for treasure and we do not place a monetary value on artifacts. AMERICAN TREASURES gives us the opportunity to set the record straight. No one owns history, it belongs to all of us; it's our American past."



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Letter from the Director



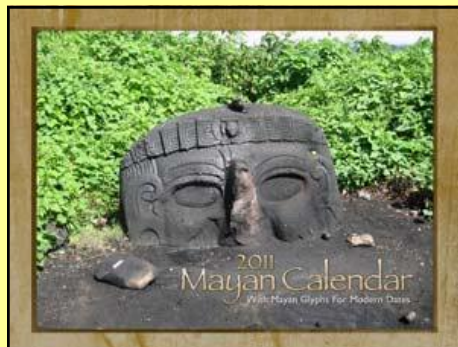
Renewed interest in our programs is largely due to the times we live in. The turbulent events in the Middle East, which have stirred our hopes and sympathies, have temporarily distracted the media from headlining their misleading reports regarding southern Mexico's safety. In addition, encouraging data on the US's economic recovery is giving most people a chance to breathe a little easier, and universities are un-freezing their study abroad program budgets. All in all, 2011 is starting on a positive note for MEC.

In this edition of ArchaeoMaya, you'll read about the study abroad programs we've conducted so far, the latest discoveries in the field, and the achievements of a great archaeologist, Dr. Bruce Dahlin, who passed away in early February. Our lead article is about our own Dr. Kirk French's new series on Discovery Channel, *American*

Treasures. Kirk was a student in the first university class I taught back in 1996, and I couldn't be prouder of his latest success. This edition also summarizes the results of our first Facebook discussion forum, a spirited debate over John Major Jenkin's theories on Tortuguero Monument 6. And as always, there's news of our up-coming programs and ways you can get involved in MEC.

We at MEC believe that the best way to share our knowledge of the ancient and modern Maya is to get people involved. Whether you join a course or a tour, attend a lecture, contribute to our Facebook discussions, or just read this newsletter, your participation is vital. The past is a shared history, and everyone has a part to play in the process of its rediscovery. From all of us at MEC, please accept our heartfelt thanks for your continued commitment to our research and education programs.

Sincerely,



2011 Mayan Calendar

This month is your last chance to purchase the 2011 wall calendar that gives you the Maya date for every day of the year. The sales year will end on March 20th, the Spring Equinox.

If you don't already have one, log on to www.mayan-calendar.com to buy online.

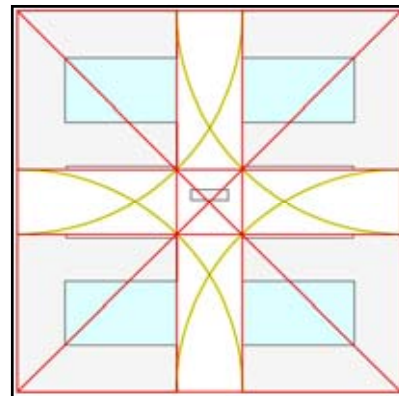
Birmingham Southern College Discovers Maya Geometry

For the fourth year in a row, Professor Scott Dorman's students from Birmingham Southern College joined MEC for a January learning expedition. This year's route took them through the rugged geographic regions of Guatemala and into northern Honduras. At the remote ruins of Seibal, an exercise led by Dr. Christopher Powell turned into a fascinating discovery. The central temple platform in Seibal's main plaza had been measured by MEC before, revealing some of its underlying geometry. With the help of Professor Dorman's students, Powell measured the platform again. This time they found another pattern, one seen throughout the Maya world.



Powell and the BSC students measuring at Seibal

The temple's overall top platform plan was formed through a combination of interlocking squares and square root of two rectangles. Powell had previously identified this pattern in temple platforms built at Chichen Itza, Palenque, and Tikal. The same proportions also appear in the pages of the Madrid Codex.



The center platform's geometric layout

With this newest example from Seibal, this geometric formula is turning out to be a standard for the ancient Maya. Finding repeating patterns like this one will be essential when the study of Maya geometry takes its next steps: connecting the form and function of sacred shapes in Maya art and architecture. The report of this newfound geometry at Seibal will be presented this spring at BSC's Latin American Symposium by students Alex Goodsell and Anthony Bianchi.

2012 Mayan Calendar Photo Competition

Do you have a great photo from your travels in the Maya world? MEC is searching for twelve exceptional photos to include in our special 2012 Mayan Calendar. If you would like your photo to reach a wide, appreciative audience, submit it to us by April 1, 2011.

Photo entries are limited to one per person. Use low-res versions of 200 kb or less for submissions, but have a high-res version available if your photo is chosen. Winning photos will be displayed as one of twelve featured images, with photographers' credits underneath.

Submissions should be emailed to ed@mayan-calendar.com.



Earliest Tomb Pyramid Discovered at Chiapa de Corzo

The recent discovery of a royal tomb at Chiapas de Corzo, Chiapas, has sparked tremendous excitement as well as debate. The burial chamber, dating to 700 B.C., is the oldest tomb yet discovered within a Mesoamerican pyramid. The elite personage found in the tomb was adorned with lavish jade ornaments, a loincloth beaded with pearls, and a mask with obsidian eyes. The skeleton of a woman, found in a tomb nearby, was decorated with similarly rich ornaments. Surrounding the royal corpses were ceramic pots, ritual axes, and pyrite mirrors. Although Chiapa de Corzo is located in a region populated today by Maya and Zoque speakers, many of the precious artifacts found in the tomb originated in Guatemala and Central Mexico; the 15 ceramic vessels show Olmec influence.

Around 700 B.C., Chiapa de Corzo was an important crossroads for trade and intercultural exchange between the Olmec from the Gulf Coast and the native Zoque people, a little known culture that dominated the Pacific coast of Chiapas and spread over the Sierras into the central Grijalva Valley. Which culture built the tomb?

While the ceramics closely resemble those from the Olmec site of La Venta, some of the pottery is indigenous in style. The chief archaeologist, Bruce Bachand of Brigham Young University, suggests that although the culture of the tomb builders probably had Olmec roots, the site may mark the beginning of a distinct Zoque culture.

The 2,700-year-old tomb is a window into how and when Zoque civilization emerged from the Olmec, Bachand contends. In the centuries prior to the construction of the 30-foot-tall Pyramid 11, Chiapa de Corzo was a large village along a major Olmec trade route. As the village grew in wealth and power, the Zoque inhabitants began to assert their cultural identity. Because of their strategic location, the Zoques of Chiapa de Corzo then began influencing other emerging cultures, such as the Maya.

There is another possible scenario, according to Bachand: Zoque culture may pre-date the Olmec. In this case the origin of some important early Mesoamerican traditions may not be Olmec at all but Zoque.



Burial uncovered in Chiapa de Corzo (photo by Bruce Bachand)

Any debate about who came first may be missing the point. A number of influential scholars reject the idea that there was one singular source of Mesoamerican civilization. Instead of viewing the Olmec as the “mother culture,” they envision many contemporaneous “sister cultures” existing side by side during the Formative period and either developing independently or through a complex socio-economic mix that resulted in shared traditions. This new model awaits further excavations at known Olmec and Zoque sites.

Also waiting are the citizens of Chiapa de Corzo, who expect that the treasures discovered in the tomb and currently being studied in Mexico City will be returned to the town one day. For now, Chiapa de Corzo is receiving wide attention as the home of the earliest tomb pyramid, and belated recognition as the oldest continuously occupied city in the Americas.

Albright College Visits a Maya Curandero in the Yucatan

A report from Dr. Michael Grofe

Following our successful visit last year, we returned to Yaxcbá to find Don Juan Bautista Cab Balam waiting for us with a row of white chairs behind a row of green ceiba trees at his herb farm. Changes were immediately apparent everywhere, and Don Juan warmly greeted us and explained that he had been receiving many more visitors in the past year from all over the world. Apparently, word is spreading. A group of Japanese tourists interested in herbal medicine had recently made a stop here. A yearly grant from the Mexican government, and donations from visitors have funded a beautiful new garden walkway, with hundreds of medicinal plants. Each grouping of plants is labeled with their Maya names and healing properties. Because the herb garden functions as a healing center for local people, many plants of the same species are necessary. Some are used as teas, some for baths, and some for applying directly to the skin as a poultices, creams, and other ointments. Don Juan introduced us to his two sons and his son-in-law who are apprenticing under him to learn how to be a Dxac Yahe herbalist in the Maya tradition.

With his typical sense of humor and winning smile, Don Juan, who's Maya name means 'Earth Jaguar', described his healing practices to the students of Richard and Fredericka Heller from Albright College. While he learned about the many properties of the local plants from his father and grandfather, Don Juan explained, he diagnoses patients through various means, including consulting guiding spirits, and quite pragmatically, whatever works—including a deck of playing cards. An illness is both physical and spiritual, and he recited for the Albright group some of the 'oraciones' and prayers that he incorporates into his healing, combining both Maya and Catholic belief systems, as has been the tradition in the Yucatan for the past five centuries since the arrival of the Spaniards.



The Albright students and Dr. Grofe at the ruins of Coba

Our trip took us from the turquoise waters of Tulum to Coba, Chichen Itza, Uxmal, and Ek Balam, where we met up again with Pancho, a superb local Maya guide whose interest, enthusiasm and epigraphic skills are some of the best in the field. One of the most memorable moments of the trip was our encounter of a troop of spider monkeys at the Otoch Ma'ax Yetel Kooch, a natural protected area whose name means 'House of Spider Monkeys and Pumas'. Here the local Maya in the town of Punta Laguna have developed a successful ecological preserve for wild spider monkeys. At the edge of the lagoon, we witnessed the rare event of an entire troop of spider monkeys, including many mothers and babies, coming down to drink with their hands as they each sat on logs at the edge of the water. With a growing interest in herbal medicine and ecotourism abroad, it is very encouraging to see how the local Maya are working with visitors to preserve their traditional knowledge, and the natural world around them.

The 2011 Chautauqua Program

Dr. Barnhart's two summer travel courses are now open for registration

Modern Maya Spirituality in the Highlands of Guatemala

June 27-July 5, 2011

Ancient Astronomy and Geometry in Angkor, Cambodia

August 12-20, 2011

News From the Field

Pakal's Tomb Finally Resealed

The discovery of a royal tomb deep within Palenque's Temple of the Inscriptions astonished the world in 1952. Overnight the Maya rose in stature, gaining as much prestige as the Egyptians. But along with public notoriety came grief. Ever since Alberto Ruz opened the tomb of Pakal, the burial chamber and its human remains have suffered the indignities of air contamination and water seepage, not to mention the removal of some of the bones for scientific study.

In those days, few people came to Palenque to view the royal tomb. But with the surge in tourism, thousands of visitors were eager to descend the steep stone staircase to see the elaborate sarcophagus of Pakal the Great. In recent years, INAH wisely restricted visitors to one hour each day, yet even those lucky tourists took a substantial toll on the crypt. Then in 2009, INAH returned all of Pakal's bones to the sarcophagus where Ruz discovered them years before. The royal tomb, and in fact the entire Temple of the Inscriptions, was declared off limits. From then on, tourists had to be content with the replica of the tomb and famed sarcophagus lid placed on exhibit at the site museum.

Now as of January of 2011, in accord with INAH's management plan for Palenque, the sarcophagus lid, raised almost 60 years ago, has been lowered back over the stone coffin, and Pakal's remains have been permanently sealed. May his bones rest in peace.

The 2012 Debate: Jenkins on MEC's Facebook Forum

This past December, just before the full lunar eclipse coincided with winter solstice, MEC opened its Facebook page to a discussion of John Major Jenkins' paper, "Astronomy in the Tortuguero Inscriptions." Jenkins' draft, first presented at the SAA meetings in 2010, was in need of some revision yet interesting enough to merit a critical reading. MEC's open forum provided an alternative to normal academic peer review. Facebook may seem an odd venue for scholarly discourse, but then, Mr. Jenkins is a popular author (*Cosmogogenesis 2012*) as well as a serious student of Maya culture, and while he disparages the doomsday prophesies for 2012, he nevertheless keeps a foot in both worlds.

Tortuguero's Monument 6 has received a lot of attention lately, mainly because its text contains the sole Maya reference to 2012, the end of the 13th baktun and, according to Jenkins, the rollover of the Long Count calendar back to zero. For years Jenkins has contended that on December 21, 2012 the winter solstice sun will align with the dark rift in the Milky Way. The Classic Maya (and the Mixe-Zoques of Izapa before them) were able to predict this cosmic event, Jenkins says, because they knew about the precession of the equinoxes. In fact, Jensen claims, the Maya designed the Long Count with this galactic alignment in mind and then, working backward, came up with the date of Creation, August 13, 3114 B.C. By way of illustrating the significance of 2012 for the ancient Maya, Jenkins found that six of the 13 dates recorded on the monument tie major events in the life of Balam Ajaw, the 7th century king of Tortuguero, to the alignment of the Sun or Jupiter with the dark rift.

The discussion began mildly enough, but as soon as several noted scholars weighed in, the online dialogue turned into a virtual duel. More was at stake than Jenkins' premises and conclusions. Sheer speculation, complained Stanley Guenther; the hidden astronomical patterns supposedly embedded in the dates were purely accidental, proof positive that archaeoastronomy was not a science. As a counterpoint, Carlos Barrera cheerfully presented his mathematical findings on the astronomical precision in Maya codices and inscriptions. Gerardo Aldana replied with an entertaining digression on coincidence. Probability came up more than twice.

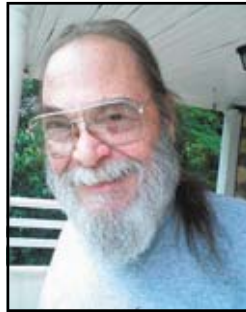
Back to the paper itself. Barbara MacCleod, co-author of a laudable translation of Monument 6, offered some helpful feedback, only to end up defending her own work in epigraphy and astronomy. Once she raised the specter of tropical and sidereal year calculations, Michael Grofe entered the fray. (Grofe's ongoing research forms the backbone of Jenkins' paper.) Calmly, Grofe argued that the vast "deep time" intervals used by Maya scribes showed their grasp of the sidereal year as well as precession. Guenther remained unshakable. Jenkins held his own as the topic swelled beyond its limits.

It's impossible to summarize the brilliant insights and mind-boggling complexities, the promising starts and blind turns on the road toward rediscovering the Maya sky. Without good signs or solid architecture, it's hard to know where you are. There is still a need for greater rigor, improved methodology, and interdisciplinary approaches in the field. As Barb MacLeod said, "We are just beginning to ask the right questions."

With Jenkins's paper as a starting point, the discussion also became a platform for burgeoning ideas, both reasonable and raw. The 170 posts could fill an ebook, lead to new directions. Clearly there is a need for open forums of this sort. In this respect, MEC's experiment was a success. Other controversial topics are to follow.

In Memoriam: Dr. Bruce Dahlin

We at MEC are sad to report that our friend and respected colleague Dr. Bruce Dahlin passed away on February 3rd, just one day before his 70th birthday. After a two-year battle with bladder cancer, his last moments were spent peacefully at his West Virginia home, his son Justin by his side. Bruce's contributions spanned the breadth of the Maya area but never in the glamorous realm of palaces, temples, and kings. Instead, Bruce was one of the pioneers of what would come to be known as household archaeology, preferring to discover more about how common Maya people lived. Bruce's focus on Maya society from the bottom-up continued throughout his career, from his early work at El Mirador to his recent 15-year project at Chunchucmil, Yucatan. This site has no carved monuments or standing elite architecture, but it does have thousands of humble Maya homes. Bruce was a kindhearted, generous, and open man. Leading by example, he always found ways to give back to the Maya communities where he worked and challenged his project members to do the same. He shared his research ideas without hesitation and mentored younger archaeologists with no expectations of return. He was one of a kind and will be dearly missed.



Bruce Dahlin, 1941-2011

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