



INSTITUTE OF MAYA STUDIES NEWSLETTER

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IMS General Meeting April 16:



"The Archaeology of Northwest Nicaragua"
with
Clifford T. Brown, PhD.

Archaeological Rescue: surveying Vestiges of the Maya Along the Hopelchén-Konchen Road

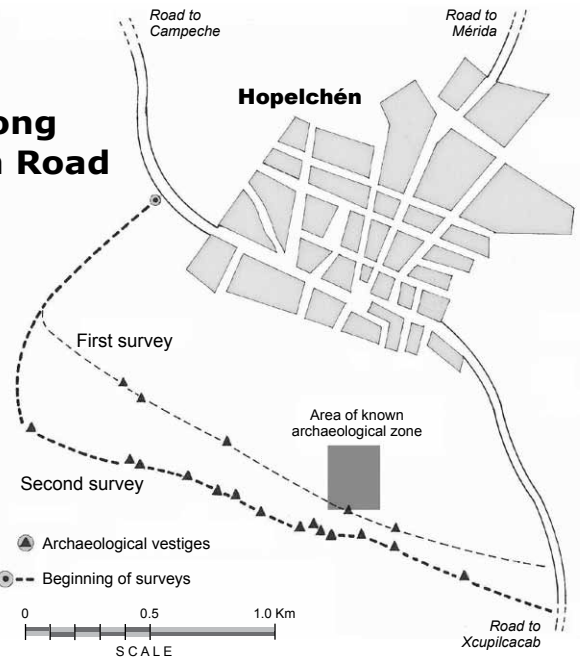
by **Antonio Benavides C., INAH Campeche**

The Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes (Communications and Transport Ministry) in the Mexican state of Campeche began modifications and enlargement of the Hopelchén-Konchen road during the summer of 2007. The paved road going south to Dzibalchén currently passes through several communities and there are many dangerous curves, which are made even worse when semi-trailers or heavy trucks come along the side lanes.

The overall plan of the Transport Ministry is a good deal – eliminate some of the curves and build deviations so that the roads do not have to pass directly through the numerous tranquil communities along the route. It will also reduce the amount of driving time it takes to get from one place to another as well as offer increased security to everyone. But the arrival of big machinery, trucks and road workers was preceded by another advantage: the archaeological rescue of Prehispanic Maya vestiges along the route.

The first phase of the road modernization encompasses 17 kilometers, from the western entrance of Hopelchén to Konchen, and will include constructing deviations around the towns of Xcupilcacab and Santa Rita Becanchén. During 2008, a second phase will include the section of road between Konchen and Pakchen.

One of the first archaeological findings south of Hopelchén was the concentration of vestiges in the Colonia San Luis. Despite



The first phase of the archaeological rescue took place along two surveys south of the town of Hopelchén.

modern urban growth and landscape modification, there are several big ancient mounds and structures that were once finished with veneer masonry. Their ruined condition and their location very near south of what American architect George Andrews calls a "transition zone" inhibits knowledge of whether they are part of the Chenes or the Puuc architectural tradition.

Maya vestiges were commonly found on top of the hills or on their slopes. Ancient builders leveled some sections or built retention walls of different heights and dimensions to create adequate zones in order to build there their houses and surrounding functional spaces.

Apsidal, circular or rectangular foundations of irregular stones were very common, generally placed on top

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**Jim Reed,
Editor**

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Royals Weren't Only Builders of Maya Temples, Archaeologist Proposes

An intrepid archaeologist is well on her way to dislodging the prevailing assumptions of scholars about the people who built and used Maya temples.

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From the grueling work of analyzing the “attributes,” the nitty-gritty physical details of six temples in Yalbac, a Maya center in the jungle of central Belize – and a popular target for antiquities looters – primary investigator Lisa Lucero is building her own theories about the politics of temple construction that began nearly two millennia ago.

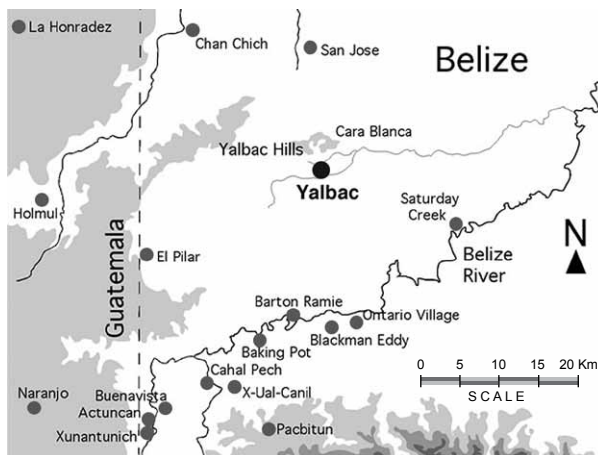
Her findings from the fill, the mortar and other remnants of jungle-wrapped structures lead her to believe that kings weren't the only people building or sponsoring Late Classic period temples (from about 550 to 850 AD), the stepped pyramids that rose like beacons out of the southern lowlands as early as 300 BC.

“Preliminary results from Yalbac suggest that royals and non-royals built temples,” said Lucero, a professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois.

In fact, judging by the varieties of construction and materials, any number of different groups – nobles, priests and even commoners – may have built temples, Lucero said, and their temples undoubtedly served their different purposes and gods.

That different groups had the wherewithal – the will, resources and freedom – to build temples suggests to Lucero that “the Maya could choose which temples to worship in and support; they had a voice in who succeeded politically.”

Yalbac's location on the eastern periphery of the southern Maya lowlands and its distance from regional centers may explain its particular dynamics and its “relative political independence,” Lucero said.



The site of Yalbac is in the Cayo District of western Belize, centrally located among numerous other Maya sites. Map by Joanne P. Baron, courtesy of the Valley of Peace Archaeology Project.



Lisa Lucero, professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois, believes that kings weren't the only Maya people building or sponsoring Late Classic-period temples. Photo by L. Brian Stauffer.

The archaeologist's new propositions challenge academic thinking on Maya temples. “Maya scholars have basically assumed that rulers built all of the temples,” she said. “No one has questioned this, although cross-cultural comparison alone would suggest otherwise.”

To be sure, the historic record is largely silent on why the Maya, a complex culture with many mysteries still to unravel, had several temples in any given center, which is why Lucero, among others, believes that archaeologists must seek answers from the buildings themselves and “construct more creative ways to assess what temple attributes can reveal about their non-material qualities.”

While largely unknown – except to looters and loggers – Yalbac is a rich site. In addition to the six temples, it also includes two plazas, a large royal residence or acropolis, and a ball court. Several of the temples are likely royal, three likely residential or memorial. None so far has been cleared of surface debris. Only one of the temples has escaped looting.

Looters, ironically, paved the way for Lucero's work to map, excavate and analyze Yalbac's Late Classic period temples. Over the years, thieves have carved nine trenches into the site in their pursuit of priceless booty. These same trenches have become Lucero's access routes to the temples. Still, in order to reduce additional invasion and damage to the historic site, Belizean authorities restrict her excavation beyond the trenches.

Some of the evidence she is accumulating is in the tons of fill – cobbles, boulders and stone pebbles, some in the tons of mortar – marl, plaster, and various kinds of loam.

Lucero – either on her own or leading groups of archaeology field school students –
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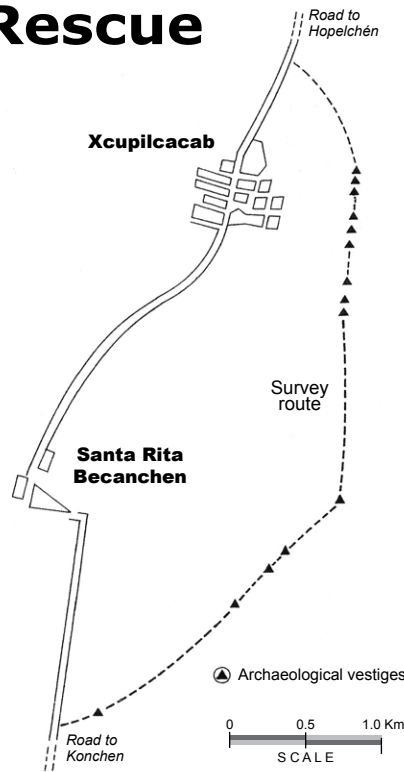
Archaeological Rescue

continued from page 1

of platforms. Sometimes they built masonry walls and thatched roofs but we also found some examples of vaulted structures. There's no surface water available, so they built underground rain storage systems or *chultuns*. Surface objects (also found in excavations) included stone mortars, ceramic, chert, obsidian and shell artifacts, some complete, some fragmented.

Mounds and domestic platform density diminished the more distant away from Hopelchén but they increased again when we arrived to the area surrounding Xcupilcacab. This little community is located 12 kilometers south from Hopelchén and many backyards in the town still have mounds and ancient vestiges. Another relevant observation is the old church of Xcupilcacab, a XVIIth-century construction still in place and conserving its perimeter atrium wall. Many Maya structures must have been dismantled to build the church as evidence suggests in the stairs placed before the entrance.

Other interesting elements found in domestic-unit excavations were in funerary contexts. The ancient Maya used to bury their dead under their homes. So they dug a hole, built a cist and placed the corpse inside, along with several objects. Most of the burials had the skull covered by an upside tripod



The second deviation of the road goes east of Xcupilcacab and Santa Rita Becanchén.

dish, sometimes also with another vessel nearby, a greenstone or a bead in the mouth, and some personal artifacts like earplugs or necklaces.

Although the Hopelchén–Xcupilcacab funerary contexts are generally dated to the Late Classic (circa 600–800 AD), their features are somehow similar to those reported by bishop Diego de Landa some centuries later:

“Once dead, they put them in a shroud, filling their mouth with ground maize, which is their food and drink which they call *keyem*, and with it they placed some of the stones which they use for money, so that they should not be without something to eat in the other life. They buried them inside or in the rear of their houses, casting into the grave with them some of their idols ...” (Tozzer 1978: 129-130).

After placing the burial and having finished the corresponding ceremonies, several



Another common feature of the burials in the region was to cover the head with a ceramic vessel. This one belongs to the Cui Orange polychrome type, dated during the Late Classic (600–850 AD).

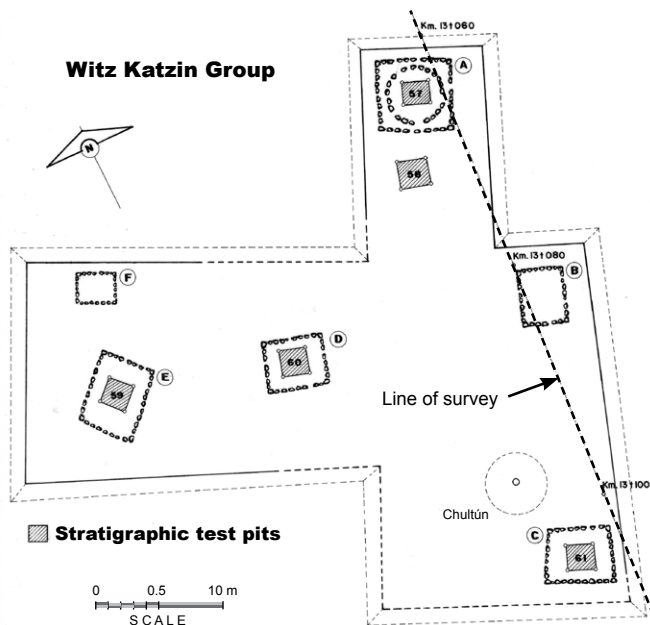
slabs covered the cist and then all was covered with mortar. The section was leveled and a new plaster placed on. Sometimes a new burial was deposited using the same space, then the new skeletal remains were gathered and placed beside the second corpse.

Other objects like ceramic vessels or stone tools were found within trench or pit excavations but without association to burials. Sometimes these were discarded or “lost” items, or they could have belonged to “construction offerings” – the intentional collocation of objects during the construction process to assure a good relationship with “the owner of the place” and avoid any possible problem. This custom has been reported ethnologically at different Maya communities (Redfield 1934: 146–147; Wauchope 1938: 143–144), and is still practiced today.

Precolumbian Maya cosmivision included several deities and extraordinary beings with whom one should be on good terms and that should not be offended. In some rural regions of the Yucatán peninsula, people believe that the jungle has an owner of which one must ask permission to hunt, collect firewood or open a new cornfield. They also speak about small and mischievous characters called *aluxoob*. Only innocent people can see them and those mocking them can get lost, be frightened or heavily annoyed.

Inside the platforms and house mounds we also found abundant chert and obsidian fragments, and pieces of grinding stones and ceramic vessels.

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The ancient Maya builders leveled the hill summits or the slopes with platforms. Then they built their houses with different plans and dimensions, according to their resources.

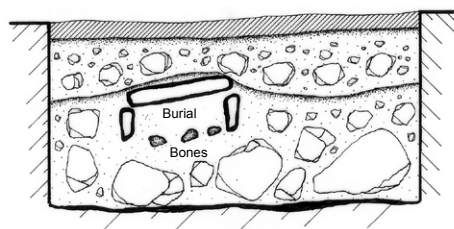
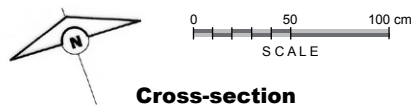
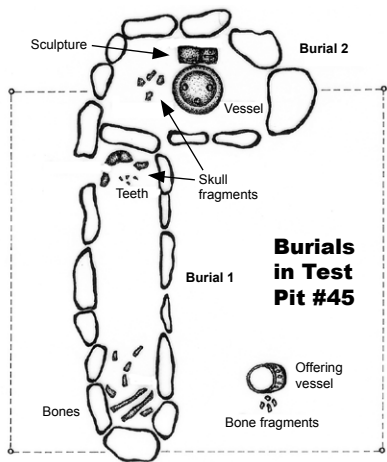


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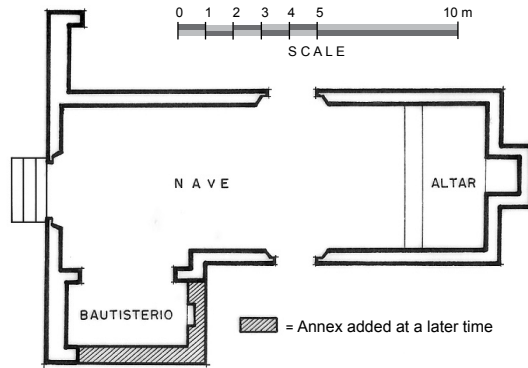
All of these little objects are clues that, when properly registered and analyzed, will help us to understand several different aspects of ancient Maya life. A general view of ceramics, for example, helps us to know that the occupation sequence begins during the Middle Preclassic (700–250 BC) and ends in the Terminal Classic (800–950 AD). At the moment, we have no evidence of anything from the Postclassic.

Relationships of our study region with other remote zones are based on two types of evidence: lithic and malacologic. We registered three greenstone items, 33 fragments of obsidian prismatic blades and two disks of the same material. Molluska include more than 180 items (complete or fragments).

Almost everybody is aware that there are no obsidian sources in the Yucatán peninsula, so it must have come from somewhere else in the highlands of Chiapas or Guatemala, central Mexico or perhaps from as far away as Michoacán. Future analysis will clarify this point. On the other hand, jade could only have



Xcupilcacab's Pre-Hispanic population used to bury their dead under the floor of their houses, in simple stone boxes prepared only with slabs and mortar. All illustrations and images courtesy of Antonio Benavides C.



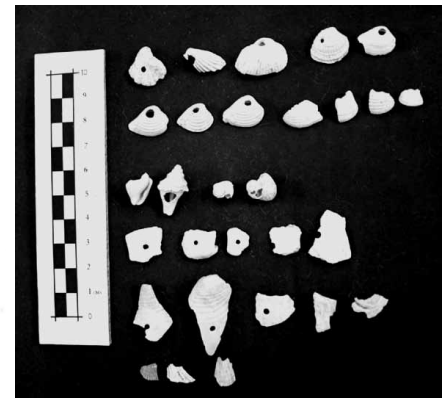
The Xcupilcacab church is a valuable historic heritage. It includes a rarely well-conserved perimeter atrium wall (not shown).

come from the middle Motagua region, the only known source.

The Hopelchén–Xcupilcacab region and its association with the sea also pose interesting perspectives. The average distance to the Campeche coast as the dove flies is 90 kilometers (a 5- or 6-day journey in ancient times); the eastern coast is 200 kilometers away and the nearest Yucatec coastal point is located around 180 kilometers far to the north.

As one would expect, most of the shells came from the west. But we also registered Spondylus shell items coming from the east coast. Intense commercial activity during the Classic period around the peninsula must have been complemented with inland routes communicating the Chenes region.

Little by little, archaeological rescue labors along the Hopelchén–Komchen road are piecing together more pages of the lost history of ancient Maya times. During 2007, specialists working with the author included Sara Novelo, David Salazar and Juan Villarino. Workers came from Cumpich, Hopelchén and



Shell items were also registered in the Hopelchen–Xcupilcacab zone. The nearest coast is directly 90 kilometers away to the west (around a 5 or 6 days journey). But we also found shell objects coming from the northern and eastern peninsula coasts.

Xcupilcacab. I wish to thank all of them for their well-done activities.

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Saving the Planet

More than 200 leaders from 71 American Indian nations in Mexico, the United States and Canada came together at Palenque to find indigenous solutions to the pollution and ecological problems that threaten the planet. The conference began with a pre-dawn ceremony that included fire, copal incense, chants in Lacandón Mayan and blasts from a conch shell.

Speakers reminded attendees that even Indian cultures have battled with environmental abuse and pointed to theories that deforestation contributed



Participants of the meeting of "Indigenous People to Heal Our Mother Earth", take part in a pre-dawn ceremony in Palenque, Mexico, March 10, 2008. Photo: Alexandre Meneghini/AP.

to the collapse of the Maya who built the temples at Palenque.

Source: Condensed from an original AP report by Mark Stevenson at: <http://ap.google.com>

December 21, 2012: Some Rational Deductions

by John Major Jenkins

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of Maya culture, but I have approached the problem in a different way).

My methodology endeavors to show a meaningful presence, within core Maya institutions, of the astronomical features involved in the galactic alignment. This coordination involves several disciplines – it is an interdisciplinary synthesis – the integrative continuity and complexity of which mitigates the possibility that my observations are all just wishful thinking.

So, it is a false assumption that calculational methodology must be provided in order to prove intention. My methodology documents the secondary effects that are predicated upon and require an ancient awareness of the galactic alignment. The deduction is similar to deducing that Paleolithic humans knew how to have sex, because the secondary effect of that knowledge – progeny – is observable. We don't have any direct evidence for their knowledge

or their “methodology” but the secondary evidence that they knew how to do it is undeniable.

Similarly, the astronomy of the galactic alignment is embedded within the Maya Creation Myth, on the monuments of Izapa, and in other Maya traditions such as the ballgame. A conceptual awareness of the alignment is clear in the iconography and the symbolic representations of astronomy within Maya mythology. This brief response to Milbrath is not the place to go further into the details of my reconstruction; the point is that my investigative methodology does not hinge upon the high level of precision that some criticize as being “impossible.”

In my books I've even stated that 100 years within range of the precise galactic alignment calculated by Jean Meeus would still be compelling enough to justify further investigation.

It Isn't a Coincidence

I've addressed and clarified these issues on the Aztlan listserv, the University of Texas Mesoamerican e-list page and elsewhere, including a brief piece I wrote during recent exchanges with professor John Hoopes (see link below). This online article revisits the suggestion that it is unlikely for the solstice placement of the end date to have been a coincidence, an idea supported by Milbrath in her rebuttal. Munro Edmonson pointed this out in his 1988 book *The Book of the Year*. I have explored and restated the implications of this idea and the interested reader can assess a rational analysis of the situation here: <http://Alignment2012.com/rationalapproachto2012.html>

Official Notice: 2012 Online!

Thanks to our webmaster Frank May, the Institute of Maya Studies now maintains an area of our web site devoted to **Understanding 2012**.

Feel free to post your own comments or questions. Updated periodically, check out our 2012 link on:

<http://mayastudies.org>

Royals Weren't Only Builders of Maya Temples

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has been able to map the Yalbac site, including its structures, looters' trenches and stelae – upright marker stones, sometimes inscribed, erected by the Maya over the millennia.

Over the years, she has dated ceramics found at Yalbac from about 300 BC through 900 AD; her plaza test pit excavations have exposed floors that date to the same period, “a typical occupation history for Maya centers.”

“We also have placed test units throughout the site to get an idea as to monumental architecture construction histories and functions,” said Lucero.

To date she has taken four New Mexico State University field school classes to Yalbac. She will take her first University of Illinois field school class this May for a six-week hands-on course in archaeological survey and excavation. Lucero joined Illinois' department of anthropology last August, after a decade at NMSU.

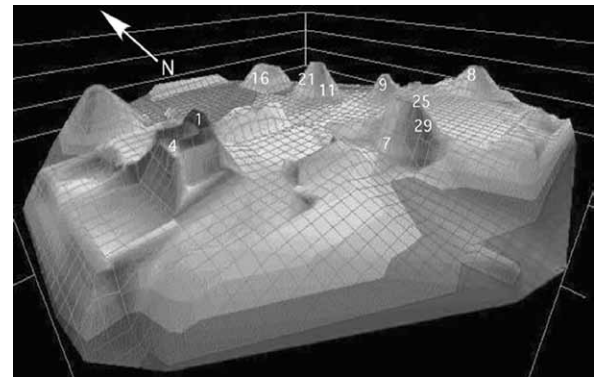
The focus this summer will be on profiling the temple looters' trenches and test excavations. Lucero and 10 undergraduates and

two graduate assistants will collect data from the six temples in order to compare temple frequency, size differences, location, layout, accessibility, history of use, construction patterns, surface decoration and ritual deposits.

“We also will expand the trenches to see if the looters missed caches – artifacts consisting of shell, jade, ceramics, lithics, etc. – that may provide clues as to temple function and purpose.”

Lucero doesn't spend much time worrying about looters. “While looting is still a problem, the relatively new management of the land-owning company, Yalbac Cattle and Ranch Co., which logs the 200,000 acres it owns, has armed patrols that protect the area from illegal poachers, loggers and looters.”

“We have been surveying the area for years without any problems,” she said. “Often the loggers show us sites they have found in the process of searching for mahogany, cedar and rosewood.”



Yalbac site map, showing positions of temples and other structures. Map generated by Sean M. Graebner, courtesy of the Valley of Peace Archaeology Project

Lucero's latest findings are detailed in the journal *Latin American Antiquity* in an article titled “Classic Maya Temples, Politics, and the Voice of the People.”

Lucero is the leading expert on Yalbac and the only archaeologist on the site authorized by the Belize Institute of Archaeology. She has conducted research in the area since 1997, and on the Yalbac site since 2002.

Source: Combined from two articles at www.news.uiuc.edu and www.sciencedaily.com, adapted from materials provided by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Submitted by Mike Ruggeri.

April 9: Travel, Art & Archaeology with Steve Mellard



The Maya god Chaak as a scribe in the Madrid Codex. Illustration courtesy of the Museo de América, Madrid.

"Understanding Maya Codices"

What are Maya Codices? Where and how were they produced? What information do they contain? How are the almanacs structured and read? Are they relevant today?

Get all the answers and more from Steve Mellard. The presentation will also include a workshop to work out the calendrical structure of an almanacs. Bring a Pencil!

Note: Excellent resources are: www.mayacodices.org and www.famsi.org/mayawriting/codices.



Page 83b of the Madrid Codex, showing the birth of three Maya deities representing the three levels of the Maya universe – the celestial realm (left), the earth, and the underworld.

April 16: IMS General Meeting:

"The Archaeology of Northwest Nicaragua"

with Clifford T. Brown, PhD.



Potsherds deeply buried in the wall of an arroyo.

The archaeology of northwest Nicaragua is very poorly known, and yet it is important to the understanding of the prehistory of both Mesoamerica and Lower Central America. This appears to be a frontier area in which complex, dynamic social processes such as trade and migration dominated the cultural history. At the time of the Spanish Conquest, the region was inhabited by a mixture of peoples who had immigrated to Nicaragua from Mesoamerica, including the Chorotega, the Subtiaba, and the Nahua. The Chorotega probably moved into Nicaragua during the Mesoamerican Classic period.



The metate is ancient. It was dug up in a local household and pressed into service. In the photo, it is being used for grinding achote. How many kitchen appliances do you have that will still be fully functional after 1000 years?

They spoke an Otomanguean language related to Chiapanec. The Subtiaba also spoke a Otomanguean language, but one related to Tlapanec, which is now spoken in Guerrero, Mexico. The Nahua spoke a Uto-Aztec language related to Aztec. They were later migrants to the area whose incursion was probably related to the Aztec political and economic expansion. I will focus my discussion on the Department of Chinandega, discussing the natural setting, ethnohistory, and archaeology. This area is little known archaeologically, but has tremendous potential.

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Upcoming Events at IMS:

April 2: *IMS Board Meeting*

All IMS members are welcome to attend.

April 9: *Travel, Art & Archaeology*

“Understanding Maya Codices” with Steve Mellard. What are Maya Codices? Where and how were they produced?

What information do they contain? How are the almanacs structured and read? Are they relevant today? Get all the answers and more from **Steve Mellard**. Includes a workshop to work out the calendrical structure of an almanacs. *Bring a Pencil!*

April 16: *IMS General Meeting*

“The Archaeology of Northwest

Nicaragua” – The archaeology of northwest Nicaragua is very poorly known, and yet it is important to the understanding of the prehistory of both Mesoamerica and Lower Central America. It was a frontier area in which complex, dynamic social processes such as trade and migration dominated cultural history, with **Clifford T. Brown**, Ph.D., Asst. Professor, Dept. of Anthropology, Florida Atlantic University.

Upcoming Events and Announcements:

April 8: *PBS TV Special*

“Cracking the Maya Code” – A 50-min. adaptation of the just completed 2-hour feature length film *“Breaking the Maya Code”*, a history of the Maya decipherment based on the book of the same title by Michael Coe. Production took 11 years and visits 40 locations in 9 countries. Check your local listings for show times.

April 11–13: *Conference*

“The Future of the Maya World” –

Theme of the 26th Annual Maya Weekend of the Pre-Columbian Society at the University of Pennsylvania Museum. Get more info at: www.museum.upenn.edu

April 18–19: *Symposium*

“Ethnohistory Symposium: Current Research in Colonial Nahuatl Studies”

– Theme of the University of Albany, Department of Anthropology Symposium in Albany, NY. There will also be a Nahuatl language workshop on Saturday,

open to all. Get more info at: www.albany.edu/anthro

May 9–10: *Symposium*
“Legacy of Mesoamerican Civilizations and Peoples Conference” – Theme of

The Institute for Mesoamerican Studies (IMS) Symposium at the University of Albany, Albany, NY. Get more info at: www.albany.edu/ims

May 10: *Lecture*

“Yukatecan Gods from

1560–1980” – by Bruce Love, PhD, for The Pre-Columbian Society of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia, PA. Get more info at: www.precolumbian.org

July 22–Ongoing: *Museum Exhibition*
“Aztec to Zapotec: Selections From the Ancient Americas Collection” – at the Orlando Museum of Art, Orlando, FL. Get more info at: www.omart.org/galleries/exhibitions/aztec/aztec.html



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**April 16: IMS General Meeting:
“The Archaeology of
Northwest Nicaragua”
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Estero Real with San Cristobal and Chonco volcanoes.