

Earth Day • April 22, 2020 • Maya Ceremonial Era Long Count: 0.0.7.7.19 • 5 Kawak 2 Wo • G6

Ceiba Representations in the Chenes Region

by Antonio Benavides C. and Sara Novelo O.

INAH Campeche

The ceiba or *yaaxché* (*Ceiba pentandra*), a sacred tree in ancient Maya cosmology, is still a relevant reference in the modern world. Over centuries, Spanish colonization tried to deny its symbolic aspects, but Maya tradition survived. The Maya preserved the importance of the ceiba and have kept it sacred through millennia. This includes several toponyms; some Hispanicized, and others with the original word and associated elements. Some examples are Seybaplaya, Seybacabecera (Campeche) or the Guatemalan site Ceibal. A mixed case is San Antonio Yaxché, a hacienda of northeast Campeche. With a Prehispanic mark, we have Nohyaxché (a town near Edzná, but also a site in eastern Yucatan), Chunyaxché (or Muyl, in Quintana Roo), the archaeological sites Yaxché-Xlabpak, Xcavil de Yaxché, Aguada Nohyaxché (8 km northeast from Dzibilnocac) or Yaxché Akal (in northeast Campeche).

The ceiba wood is lightweight and is used for elaborate sculptures, canoes, handicrafts, furniture, match boxes, etc. The floss (*kapok*, in Yucatec Mayan) or silky fiber contained in the fruits was used in ancient times to weave blankets. Today it has a large commercial demand in Central America as it does not cause allergies, so it is frequently used to stuff pillows and mattresses for people with asthma and/or allergies to feathers and wool (Cfr. Cano and Hellmuth 2008: 5).

In ancient times, the ceiba was occasionally represented on polychrome vessels. On some plates from sites in northeast Campeche, ceibas appear on the central flat area as the principal motif. The creators of those dishes,



This Ceiba Tree (Ceiba pentandra) stands proud along the path as you walk into Tikal. The Ceiba (Silk Cotton Tree, yaaxché in Mayan) is Guatemala's national tree and a tree that has played an important spiritual role to people in Mesoamerica as well as the circum-Caribbean region. Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth FLAAR Guatemala.

dated to the VII and IX centuries CE, varied their way to represent the tree, so the images representing ceibas are not always evident. The representation of the ceiba as a living and sacred being was associated to other relevant ideas always present in the Maya mind, for example the importance of number 4 and, at the same time, the ritual context associated to the vessels.

In an archaeological rescue from several structures between



Jim Reed,
Editor

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Pak Chén and Dzibalchén, south of Hopolchén, Campeche, we documented two vessels containing ceiba images (Novelo y Benavides 2014).

Despite its poor state of preservation, the plate registered near Tabasqueño shows the trunk of the tree and two large branches bifurcating on the upper part and then descending to both sides. The trunk also has several orange circles (fruits?). The branches also have other long elements finished with pointed motives and marked with orange spheres, filling the empty spaces around

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IMS Program Note:

All classes and events at Miami-Dade College have been suspended, therefore there will be no IMS public presentation in April.

Saving Earth Magazine Launches in Spring 2020

A new magazine focusing
on environmental issues,
green businesses, conservation,
human rights, and climate science



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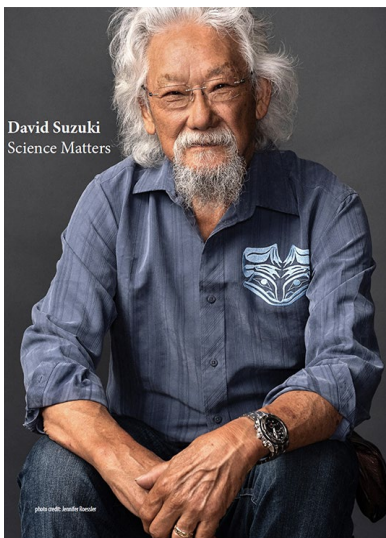
Jim Reed
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Saving Earth inspires readers to change how they interact with the planet and offers solutions to global environmental challenges that we face. Some of these solutions include directing readers to organizations and businesses that are making a difference, giving them the ability to support and follow the issues they care most deeply about.

Across the world, we see a groundswell of people engaging to protect their environment, from governments banning plastic bags to individuals inventing exciting new green technologies and **Saving Earth Magazine** is becoming a part of this step-change. There has never been a more crucial time for this magazine. We don't just want to report the conversation, we plan on creating the conversation!

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At **Saving Earth Magazine**, we strive to create and bring together ideas that have the power to transform the way we interact with the planet – to devise, communicate, educate, share and help implement strategies and new technologies, which reduce pollution, reduce greenhouse gases, nurture and protect flora and fauna, and protect the waterways. With contributions from experts



David Suzuki
Science Matters

Saving Earth Magazine features Canadian journalist and climate activist David Suzuki, as well as other global investigative reporters, and leading academic researchers.

solutions that the world should replicate; and inspirational human interest stories and biographies that serve to inspire our lives and help us reconnect to the Earth.

By sharing ideas about how we can make a better world, we will help help to heal communities and support those who are at the forefront of ecological and environmental research. **Saving Earth** is a manual that can be referenced globally, and will provide an evolving canvas of themes, information and ideas, which will inspire a new era of human interaction with the planet.

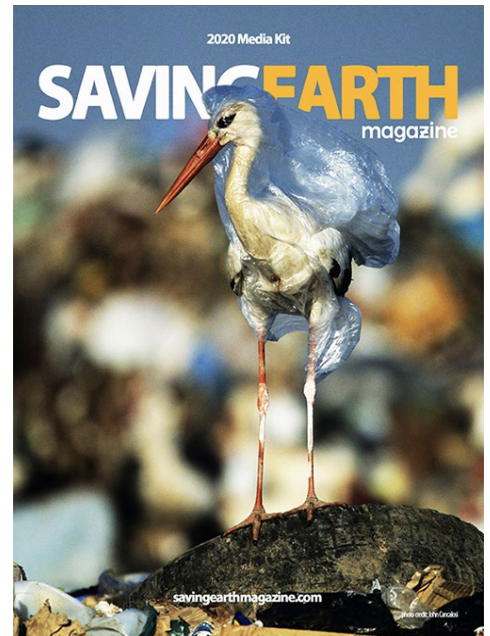
It is a public forum where ideas and dialogue help to shape our thinking in these emerging fields.

It will help us rethink the way we interact with the planet as we seek to find new vistas of renewable energy and resources.

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Saving Earth Magazine publisher Teena Clipston is committed to being a climate leader. She is currently a candidate for climate leadership training with Al Gore and The Climate Reality Project. The training includes the science of climate change, how it's transforming daily life for people around the world, the solutions in our hands today, powerful storytelling, public speaking, social media networking techniques, media engagement strategies, and how activists are building momentum for solutions worldwide. If you would like more info on **Saving Earth**, contact Teena Clipston at: teena@savingearthmagazine.com



Carnitas Vendor Leads Archaeologists to the Capital of a Maya Kingdom

The long-lost capital of the Sak Tz'i' kingdom was probably settled in 750 BCE

What do carnitas – pork simmered for hours in its own lard – and an ancient Maya carved stela have in common? Apart from their shared Mexican-ness, or Mexican-ness, not much, one might think.

But the two are inextricably linked in the discovery of the long-lost capital of an ancient Maya kingdom in the southern state of Chiapas.

In June 2014, Whittaker Schroder, then a grad student at the University of Pennsylvania, was touring archaeological sites in Chiapas looking for inspiration for a dissertation topic when he saw a carnitas vendor waving at him on the side of a highway in Ocosingo, near the border with Guatemala.

Believing that the vendor was encouraging him to buy some tacos, and being a vegetarian, Schroder continued on his way. However, the day before he was leaving Chiapas, the student saw the same man in the same place waving at him again.

This time, Schroder, who had been visiting the same area for years, pulled over.

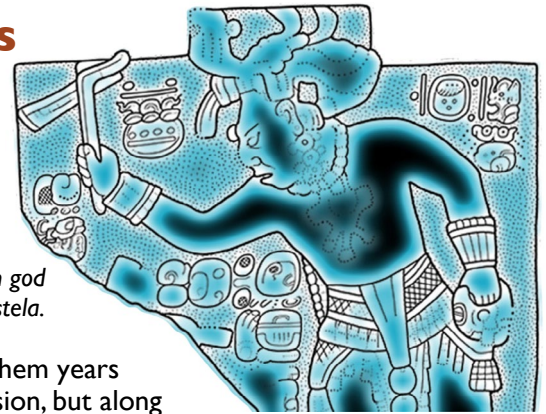
The carnitas vendor, it turned out, wasn't interested in selling any of his succulent pork, but instead wanted to alert the student – whom he knew was interested in Maya history – to a discovery made by his friend: an ancient stone inscribed with stories of rituals, battles, a mythical water serpent, and the dance of the rain god.

The following day, Schroder and another grad student, Jeffrey Dobereiner of Harvard, met the vendor's friend, a cattle rancher, convenience store owner, and carpenter, who showed them the Maya stone tablet.

Schroder would later tell Charles Golden, an associate professor of archaeology at Brandeis University, and Andrew Scherer, a bioarchaeologist at Brown University, about what he saw, prompting them to hatch a plan to excavate the site where the stone was found.



Schroder, left, and Scherer excavate in the ballcourt which they enclosed with a fence to keep away nosy cows. (Charles Golden)



Filtered detail of the character portrayed in the dance of the rain god on the Sak Tz'i' stela. (By Jim Reed)

It took them years to get permission, but along with a team of researchers from Mexico, the United States (including Schroder), and Canada, they began excavating the site in June 2018. The ancient site was in the backyard of the cattle rancher.

What they discovered amazed them – the ancient capital of the Sak Tz'i' Maya kingdom. Researchers and academics have been looking for evidence of Sak Tz'i' since 1994.

Named Lacanja Tzeltal after the nearby community, the site discovered by Golden and Scherer was likely settled by 750 BCE and then occupied for more than 1,000 years.

As a result of excavations, the archaeological team has found remnants of pyramids, a royal palace and a ballcourt as well as a treasure trove of Maya monuments. The team has also found remnants of fortifications believed to have been built to keep out invaders.

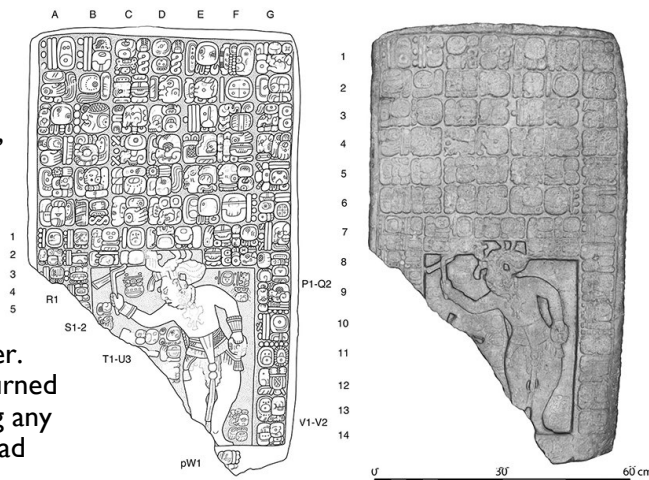
Sak Tz'i' – which means white dog, although for what reason is unknown – was far from the most powerful Maya kingdom, and the structures that once stood in its capital are very modest when compared with large city sites.

But Golden says that the discovery still contributes a lot toward a greater understanding of ancient Maya culture and politics. It's a "big... piece of the puzzle," he said. He and his collaborators published the results of their research in the December edition of the *Journal of Field Archaeology*.

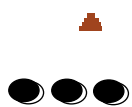
Pending permission from the Mexican government and the local community, the archaeological team plans to return to the Sak Tz'i' capital in June to continue mapping the ancient city using LiDAR. They also intend to stabilize ancient structures that are in danger of collapsing, carry out further studies of sculptures and other monuments found at the site, and explore an area believed to have been a marketplace.

"To be truly successful, the research will need to reveal new understandings of the ancient Maya and represent a locally meaningful collaboration with their modern descendants," noted Golden.

Source: From an online article published 3.14.2020 on mexiconewsdaily.com



At left, drawing of a tablet found at the site. Right, a digital 3-D model. By Stephen Houston (Brown University) and Charles Golden (Brandeis).



Ceiba Representations in the Chenes Region

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INAH Campeche *continued from page 1*

the tree. As a matter of fact, when the ceiba gives fruits, once ripe, these are like dark brown spheres and maybe that's the reason they were shown as orange circles. A fine black line borders the tree, and, around it, the painter drew another black wider circle.

The interior wall motifs of the vessel were also prepared combining orange and black paint. It seems they represented two motifs, and both could be stylized centipedes, a species associated with dark spaces and the underworld. The longer motif could show the segmented body and the shorter image seems to be the centipede head as seen from its front. At both sides, the artist also scribed the typical leaves of the scolopendrium fern (**Fig. 1**).

The dish featured can be compared to other two vessels of unknown provenance and with similar motifs. First, we have a plate exhibited in the Mérida's Museo del Mundo Maya. Its bottom was painted with a ceiba with black trunk and branches. It also has the pointed finished orange extensions, and, at the same time, it has orange circles bordering the trunk, branches, and extensions.

In this case, the vessel exhibits some peculiarity; the ceiba emerges from a three-red-circles element (stones of the original hearth?) under which it seems to be a mythical entity head (Earth Monster?) including its teeth. Another interesting detail is in the upper section of the ceiba, where there is a long-necked bird apparently pecking a point (fruit?) emerging from a branch. (**Fig. 2**).

The painted motifs on the interior walls of the plate refer to the Maya division of the universe with four groups of vertical lines. There are also four heads which may allude to the putrefaction process of the human body. The curved element in front of each head may represent a seed –  possibly hinting at

rebirth or renaissance.

The second dish that can be compared is very similar to the previous one, but it lacks the bird on the upper section and the heads of the interior walls are a little longer.

There is also a vessel coming from the Campeche northeast region, excavated nearby Dzibalchen. It has a ceiba forming a cross, but it's hard to tell which section goes up or down. Each segment has a kind of an "S" channel beginning on one side and ending on the other side of the same segment.

At both sides of each branch segment surges a curvilinear motif like a thorn at whose end hangs a circular element. All of the designs were painted red and only the spheres of the ends show a light orange slip or cover corresponding to the plate bottom color. Two fine black lines surround the previous motifs and on top of them some red triangles were painted as forming a framework that can also be a flash or a striking rim of the central painting (**Fig. 3**).

Another example of the Centro INAH Yucatán collection was published as part of an archaeological exhibition presented in Korea (Cfr. Maya 2012) and renders a stylized ceiba. In this case the central part of the image has two black circles on top of a bar of the same color. Two large branches emerge and long volutes flow with black circles on top and at the ends. Another two volutes emerge from the lower section, but bigger and also having black circles at both sides and at the ends.

The upper section of the representation shows a similar motif to the previously commented one (orange volutes and black spheres), but the central section was painted

Fig. 1. Plate of the Yaxché Orange Polychrome type, Yaxché variety and lateral designs.



Fig. 2. Museo del Mundo Maya, unknown provenance.



Fig 3. Plate of the Saxché Orange Polychrome type, Saxché variety, and its central motif.



Fig. 4. Plate of unknown provenance.

with a long thorn whose end is also topped off by a black circle (**Fig. 4**).

The interior walls of this vessel seem to be pseudoglyphs. The basic motif has two black circles surrounded by a white band with a line of points

continued on page 6

Scarlet Macaw DNA Points to Ancient Breeding Operation in the Southwest U.S.

Scarlet Macaw (*A.M. cyanoptera*) walks on the ground at Copan. (LAKDOS)

Somewhere in the American Southwest or northern Mexico, there are probably the ruins of a scarlet macaw breeding operation dating to between 900 and 1200 CE, according to a team of archaeologists who sequenced the mitochondrial DNA of bird remains found in the Chaco Canyon and Mimbres areas of New Mexico.

Remains of a thriving prehistoric avian culture and breeding colony of scarlet macaws exist at the northern Mexican site of Paquimé, or Casas Grande. However, this community existed from 1250 to 1450, well after the abandonment of Chaco Canyon, and could not have supplied these birds to Southwest communities prior to the 13th century, said Richard George, graduate student in anthropology, Penn State.

Historically, scarlet macaws lived from South America to eastern coastal Mexico and Guatemala, thousands of miles from the American Southwest. Previously, researchers thought that ancestral Puebloan people might have traveled to these natural breeding areas and brought birds back, but the logistics of transporting adolescent birds are difficult. None of the sites where these early macaw remains were found contained evidence of breeding – eggshells, pens or perches.

“We were interested in the prehistoric scarlet macaw population history and the impacts of human direct management,” said George. “Especially any evidence for directed breeding or changes in the genetic diversity that could co-occur with different trade networks.”

The researchers sequenced

the mitochondrial DNA of 20 scarlet macaw specimens, but were only able to obtain full sequences from 14. They then directly radiocarbon-dated all 14 birds with complete or near complete genomes and found they fell between 900 and 1200 CE.

“We looked at the full mitochondrial genome of over 16,000 base pairs to understand the maternal relationships represented in the Chaco Canyon and Mimbres regions,” said George.

Mitochondrial DNA exists separate from the cell nucleus and is inherited directly from the mother. While nuclear DNA combines the DNA inherited from both parents, mitochondrial DNA can show direct lineage because all siblings have the same mtDNA as their mother, and she has the same mtDNA as her own siblings and mother, all the way back through their ancestry.

Scarlet macaws in Mexico and Central America have five haplogroups – genetically similar, but not identical mitochondrial DNA lines – and each haplogroup has a number of haplotypes containing identical DNA lines. The researchers found that their scarlet macaws were all from haplogroup 6 and that 71 percent of the birds shared one of four unique haplotypes. They reported the results of this analysis in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

The researchers found that the probability of obtaining 14 birds from the wild and having them all come from the same haplogroup, one that is small and isolated, was extremely small. A better explanation, especially because these specimens ranged over a 300-year period, is that all the birds came from the same breeding population and that this population existed somewhere in the American Southwest or northern Mexico.

“These birds all likely came from the same source, but we don’t have any way

Early illustration of a scarlet macaw drawn in “Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots,” by Edward Lear in 1832.



to support that assumption without examining the full genome,” said George. “However, the genetic results likely indicate some type of narrow breeding from a small founder population with little or no introgression or resupply.”

However, no one has found macaw breeding evidence dating to the 900 to 1200 period in the American Southwest or northern Mexico.

“The next step will be to analyze macaws from other archaeological sites in Arizona and northern Mexico to narrow down the location of this early breeding colony,” said Douglas Kennett, professor and head of anthropology, Penn State, and co-director of the project. Also at Penn State working on the project are Brendan Culleton, research associate in anthropology; and Thomas Harper, postdoctoral scholar in anthropology.

Source: From an article by Andrea Elyse Messer for Penn State News on news.psu.edu

Unbundling the Past: Events in Ancient and Contemporary Maya History for April by Zach Lindsey

5 April 757 CE: On 9.16.6.0.0 4 Ajaw 3 Sotz' G9 at Yaxchilan, Yaxuun B'ahlam (Bird Jaguar) celebrated his fifth year in office as king by dancing the *xukpi* dance. But he didn't do so alone. He brought along his five-year-old son and future ruler Chelew Chan K'inich (Shield Jaguar). Yaxuun B'ahlam was a master propagandist, but he also was head of an unstable dynasty.

Though he was the son of the previous king, his mother was a lesser queen or consort, and his claim to the throne was "Game of Thrones-y" at best. Yaxuun B'ahlam used a variety of propaganda techniques, from emphasizing minor victories to portraying lesser lords in important positions on monuments.

He also ensured his son wouldn't deal with the same trouble by showing him off every chance he got. Father and son dance together on Yaxchilan Lintel 2, a personal

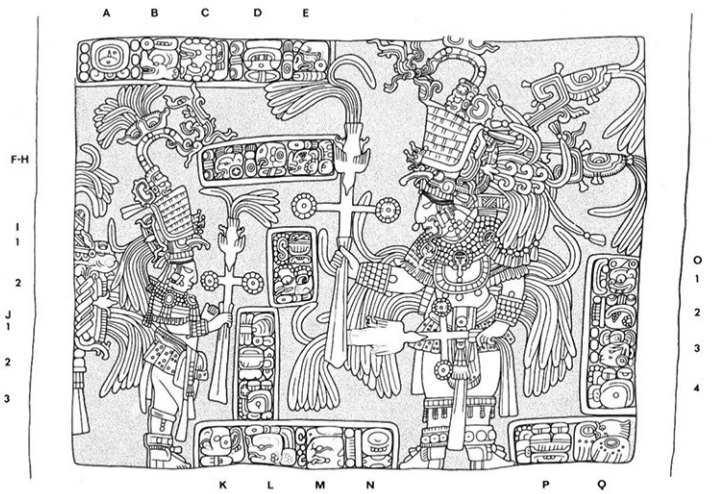
A young Shield Jaguar dances with his father Bird Jaguar on Stela 2 at Yaxchilan. Illustration by Ian Graham.

favorite of mine. I study what ancient art can teach us about childhood, so I love this image of a five-year-old in an almost-identical massive "drum major" headdress as his papa. In my studies, I look at the more cynical reasons people portrayed kids, and maybe a guy who went by "He of 20 Captives" was not the best father figure.

But it is easy to imagine dad's pride when his son walked out with that staff with the bird on the end, ready to perform a dance of leadership. It is the first time, or at least the first time we know of, that Chelew Chan K'inich

participated in a public ritual. If Chelew Chan K'inich was anything like me when I was a child, it is also easy to imagine him immediately dropping the *xukpi* staff, but let's hope he was more graceful than I.

Other cool things happened this month, but I ran out of room to share about them! Whoops. I guess that's what happens when they cancel the SAAs where I was scheduled to present this month – I find any excuse to ramble about my topic. *Stay well everyone!* 🌱



Ceiba Representations in the Chenes Region by Antonio Benavides C. and Sara Novelo O.

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and there's a red band around it. Both circles seem to be a part of one element (an insect head? a centipede?). There's a small black dot on top of the design (putrefaction?). At the left side of the "insect head", the ceramist painted a stylized head where we can see the open mouth, the teeth, and an eye like a drop. Under the eye, there are two black stains (death/putrefaction). It's hair is behind the face and has a frontal forelock.

The next motif is another head with its mouth more open (maybe he lost the mandible and the teeth), it has the same kind of eye and under it there's a triangle corresponding to the hole shown by a skull that has lost its nose. The head preserves some hair, once again there are two black decomposition circles and just in front of the face there's a volute probably denoting pestilence.

The next element is a group of three horizontal bars with black circles on the ends. The two upper bars are crossed by a diagonal band containing a line formed by dots, but the lower bar is all painted black.

Fig. 5. Polychrome plate of unknown provenance.



The three bars could represent different stages of bones decomposition.

As a matter of fact, both motives, the semi-open mouth heads, locks of hair and black dots under the eye, but also the three attached bars were also found represented in the interior section of a funerary dish registered in the archaeological rescue previously attributed to an area near Tabasqueño.

Another floristic case represented on a polychrome plate, also of unknown provenance and part of the Korean exhibition, has as a central motif an element like a drop (seed?) from which emerge curved lines (branches and roots?). Other strokes end with points, like flowers or fruits. The lateral elements are very similar to those seen on the vessels first commented on in this text – curved lines, the ends of which have orange/red tips (**Fig. 5**).

Comments

The first tree renderings we know of from the Maya civilization are those painted at San Bartolo, a site in the Guatemalan Peten located about 50 km northeast from Tikal, or 80 km southeast from Calakmul. Those Preclassic masterworks show flat or intertwined trunks with a big bird on the upper section (Cfr. Kaufmann 2003). *continued on page 7*

Ceiba Representations in the Chenes Region

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The initial study to identify the five trees painted at San Bartolo refer us to the ceiba, the gourd, the guarumbo, the mahogany, and an unidentified species. The ceiba painted at San Bartolo has, on the central part of the trunk, a diagonal band framing a sign meaning “precious, jewel”; like an inverted U letter, as can be seen on some Izapa stelae (Cfr. Landon 2011) (**Fig. 6**).

Other tree examples occupying the central part of the representation can be seen on stone monuments of the Izapa stelae (numbers 2, 5, 10, 25, or 27). On Stela 25, the trunk is shown as the body of a big crocodile facing downward; its rear legs are transformed into branches with leaves, and a bird occupies the upper section. Another big bird is aside on top of a structure supported by an individual richly dressed. A similar image was registered as part of the iconography on a vessel of unknown provenance. In that case, there is a canoe (remembering the aquatic ambit) and a growing tree whose basis is a crocodile head (Cfr. Schele and Mathews 1998: 143).

In the iconography of Teotihuacan, there are also bird-crowned trees, but the Tetitla and Tepantitla murals depict the Mother Goddess with a central big bird head.

Those trees have been interpreted as the axis of the world or axis mundi, elements that in the Prehispanic minds indicated the central place of whatever existed and through which there was a communication of the earthly, celestial, and underworld levels. The upper and lower levels were inhabited by gods and associated entities that daily influenced terrestrial life. Furthermore, as a fundamental axis, the tree marked the four directions of the cosmos, each one identified with a specific color: red for the east, black for the west, white for the north, and yellow for the south.

The bird perched on the branches has been identified with an entity called the “Principal Bird Deity”, sometimes

Fig. 6.
Mythic trees
from San Bartolo;
Izapa Stela 25,
and a vessel.



named Itzam-Ye. Besides the San Bartolo cases, other known similar representations have been reported at Palenque rendered on the Foliated Cross panel and on Pakal’s sarcophagus covering stone, or on Tikal’s Lintel 3 of Temple IV. This entity seems to be a solar avatar, sometimes shown as a macaw and associated with vegetation growing (Cfr. De la Garza 1995: 16-28; De la Garza et al 2012: 162-163; Taube 1992: 31-41).

Acknowledgments

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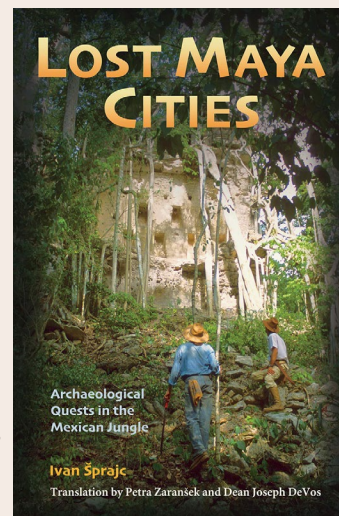
Lost Maya Cities: Archaeological Quests in the Mexican Jungle

Hailed in International publications and media as “a real-life Indiana Jones,” Slovenian archaeologist Ivan Šprajc has been mapping out previously unknown Maya sites in Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula since 1996. Most recently, he was credited with the discovery of the Chactún and Lagunita sites in 2013 and 2014, respectively, helping to fill in what was previously one of the largest voids in modern knowledge of the ancient Maya landscape: the 2,800-square-mile Calakmul Biosphere Reserve in central Yucatan.

Previously published in Šprajc’s native Slovenian and in German, this thrilling account of machete-wielding jungle expeditions has garnered enthusiastic reviews for its depictions of the efforts, dangers, successes, and disappointments experienced as the explorer-scientist searches out and documents ancient sites that have been lost to the jungle for centuries. A skilled communicator as well as an experienced scholar, Šprajc conveys in eminently accessible prose, a wealth of information on various aspects of the Maya culture, which he has studied closely for decades.

The result is a deeply personal presentation of archaeological research on one of the most

enigmatic civilizations of the ancient world. Generously illustrated, this book follows the chronology of Šprajc’s discoveries, focusing on what he considers the most interesting episodes. Those who specialize in Mesoamerican prehistory and archaeology will certainly relish Šprajc’s reports concerning his many field surveys and the discoveries that resulted. General readers, too, will enjoy his accounts of previously undocumented sites, ancient urban centers overtaken by the jungle, massive sculpted monuments, and mysterious hieroglyphic inscriptions.



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About the Author

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Upcoming Events cancelled:

IMS Public Presentation
All classes and events at Miami-Dade College are suspended, including the April IMS public presentation. The program with Mark Brenner will be rescheduled.

10th Annual Maya at the Lago This year’s Maya@Lago conference has been postponed until April 2021.

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