

The Mysteries of the Ancient Maya Explored: Temple Cities in the Context of Forest Gardens

By Dr. Anabel Ford

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Dr. Anabel Ford acquired her BA (1974), MA (1976) and PhD (1981) in Anthropology and Archeology from the University of California, Santa Barbara. From 1998 to the present, she has been a Research Archeologist at the Institute of Social, Behavioral and Economic Research at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has also been the founding Director of the Mesoamerican Research Center of the same university since 1987. Dr. Ford has excavated and surveyed a number of Mesoamerican sites in Belize and Guatemala. Since 2003, she has been directing the El Pilar archeological site Program: integrating resource management in Belize/Guatemala. She has been awarded the US Senate Congressional Recognition for Outstanding Community Service, in addition to other awards in recognition of her being the Educator of the year in 2000 in California.

News Flash: The World Failed to End! Strange predictions were, surprise!!, not true! So, we can learn about the ancient Maya and El Pilar of the Maya Forest.

Popular views of the Classic Maya present a tableau of an environment destroyed by the avarice of the culture itself. Yet how can that be true considering research has shown their agricultural practices to be sustainable? We know that the agrarian Maya emerged around 1000 BC in the southern Maya lowlands and that they supported a growing civilization for more than 2,000 years. When the Spanish conquest swept Mesoamerica in 1521, they encountered thriving city-states lush with tropical fruit trees and eclectic maize fields surrounding city centers in the northern Maya lowlands of the Yucatan Peninsula.



Middle America and the Maya

The Maya had sophisticated writing, mathematical, and calendrical systems. They had the only known New World writing system used to document regal rites-de-passages, challenges to power, alliances and visits, as well as celebratory proceedings. Their feats themselves are attested by the stone carvings, decorated pottery vessels, and bark books used to record such important events, some as early as 37 BC. Their astronomy was precise, and their mathematical system fixed with the zero in a place based vigesimal system, incrementing every 20 (counting fingers and toes) instead of 10 (only fingers). Equally sophisticated was their agricultural system, bountiful and diverse forest gardens that sustained large populations for thousands of years. These systems are testaments of the Maya's dynamic and elaborate civilization.

Early civilizations around the world present each their own mysteries revolving around how they established themselves, how they developed, who their rulers were, and how they managed their lives. We know of Babylon that grew within the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates valleys, of Mohenjo-Daro of the Indus River, and Angkor of South East Asia. Each of these civilizations built magnificent public buildings, integrated large farming populations, and managed water works. The Maya are no exception. Their long prehistory developed in the tropical lowlands of Mesoamerica, following traditions established around the livelihood of agriculture and commerce. With roots in Olmec, the mother of Mesoamerican culture, Maya traditions were carried forth to be recorded by Spanish chroniclers and later by explorers and ethnographers. The story weaves a tapestry of beauty and power that can be appreciated when one travels in the region and encounters their awesome ancient monuments.

Introducing Ancient Middle America

The Maya did not suddenly disappear from the lowlands as many authors and scriptwriters suggest. Today there are 3-4

million Maya, speaking many distinct Mayan languages descended from the same family of languages spoken by the ancient Maya. The descendants of the ancient Maya live across the same region they always occupied –modern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and parts of El Salvador and Honduras. The mystery is not where they are, but why they abandoned the trappings of their advanced civilization in the southern Maya Lowlands, where I discovered El Pilar and where major centers such as Tikal are located.



Tikal, Peten, Guatemala

The occupation of the New World, encompassing the Maya area, dates back little more than 12,000 years. When early agriculturalists were establishing fields in the Middle East, the first peoples from the northern Far East, Siberia, were radiating into the Americas. Within 2,000 years, occupation by mobile hunter-gatherers had spread from Arctic areas in the north to Patagonia in the south. It was not until the Early Bronze Age that agricultural settlements would be identified in Mesoamerica.

When the Phoenicians were plying the Mediterranean, the first Maya centers were appearing. When Alexander the Great was moving east, the first stone monuments with calendar dates were erected in the southern Maya lowlands. It was during the Byzantine Empire that the Maya civilization emerged, and during the expansion of Islam, the Maya achieved their height. When the first Crusaders were invading the Levant, Maya populations had left the southern areas to expand in the north. With the fall of Constantinople came the Spanish invasion and conquest that ended literacy for the Maya.

The Origins of the Maya

Settlements of incipient Maya emerge late in the tropical lowland Maya forest, around 2,000 BC. Farmsteads are evident but, archaeologically speaking, they were nearly invisible until around 1,000 BC. These Maya settlers started in a simple way, eventually evolving into a flamboyant society that peaked in the second half of the first millennium between the years 250-900 AD. After the tenth century, the great city monuments of the southern Maya Lowlands were mostly abandoned. Communities continued to live in the area, as witnessed by Cortes' famous traverse of the region in 1524. Readers of his letters to Charles V are often confused by his evidence of thick vegetation, since Cortes, his 97-person cavalry, and 3000 native Mexico soldiers regularly spent their nights in houses and ate from the local larder.

Chronology

Archaic	8000 - 2000 BC	Mobile Horticulturalists
Early Preclassic	2000 BC - 1000 BC	Pioneer Farming Settlements
Middle Preclassic	1000 BC - 300 BC	Expansion Across Lowlands
Late Preclassic	300 BC - 240 AD	Established City Centers
Early Classic	250 - 600 AD	Rise of the Powerful Interior
Late Classic	600 - 900 AD	Height of Maya Civilization
Terminal Classic	900 - 1000 AD	Collapse of the Classic Maya
Early Postclassic	1000 - 1250 AD	Re-focus of Populations
Late Postclassic	1250 - 1521 AD	Competition among Centers
Spanish Invasion	after 1521 AD	Disease and Depopulation



Ancient Maya Writing on pottery

This describes the way the Maya established their communities, in the context of forest gardens, and how the Maya, as with all Mesoamericans, traveled and traded on footpaths difficult to negotiate with horses and military cavalry.

Archaeologists have divided the cultural sequence of the lowland Maya into periods that reflect the general developments. The chronology of the Maya is straightforward. Archaic (8,000-2,000 BC) foragers roamed the area in the earliest times, but it all really started in the Preclassic (1,000 BC-240 AD) when people settled down and began to practice agriculture. The civilization flourished in the Classic Period (250-1,000 AD) when the majority of the largest temples and palaces were built. This civilizational process was transformed in the Postclassic (1,000-1521 AD), following the so-called Classic Maya Collapse. The essence of this timeline is summarized in the following table.

The Height of The Classic Maya Civilization

The Classic Period is defined by the appearance and use of dated monuments that initiate as public monuments toward the end of the third century AD. Stelae and altars recorded the political, social, and religious history of the Maya using the Long Count, a calendrical system based on multiples of a year with, or tun in Mayan, based on an origin point calculated as 3114 BC. Accumulating in increments of 20 for Baktun, 20 * 20 for Katun, and 20 * 20 * 20 for Piktun, records mark significant historical events.

El Baul Monument 1 7.19.13.7.12 (AD 37)

7 bak'tun	7 × 144,000 = 1,008,000 days
19 k'atun	19 × 7,200 = 136,800 days
15 tun	15 × 360 = 5,400 days
7 uinal	7 × 20 = 140 days
12 k'in	12 × 1 = 12 days

The Long Count Maya calendrical system

The seven centuries of the Classic Period exhibited tremendous civilization developments fueled by the steady increase in population. The cores of the massive ancient cities that we see today—monumental stone-vaulted buildings and huge temple pyramids—were founded and built in this period.



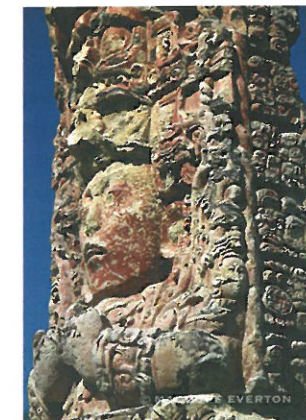
Labna, Yucatan, Mexico

All major centers of the region, examples include Calakmul, Naranjo, Caracol, and Tikal, experienced major growth in the Late Classic Period. This is especially noted at El Pilar where immense building projects were completed. This growth was rooted in the sustainable management of the region's valuable resources found throughout the rolling ridge lands of the limestone platform that makes up the greater Yucatan Peninsula.

The Maya were able to support and maintain their society's growth by forging a dynamic alliance with their environment. This alliance was a balancing act that promoted the development of the Maya civilization across 40,000 sq km of space.

Toward the end of the Classic, the elaborate civilization of the Maya began to unravel. An increase in conflict was recorded on stelae, probably due to competition over resources; the culmination is evident in the final disregard for site maintenance. The major centers that flourished in the Classic Period saw no new construction after AD 900-1000. Residential settlements, however, were not deserted, but they too were transformed over the next centuries to present a simpler style. The great Classic centers in the south lowlands gave way to the development of the north. When Tikal's tall temples and dense palaces were left to be overgrown by the forest by the tenth century, cities of the north began to grow.

In some areas of the south, building activity was prolonged right to the end of the Terminal Classic, as recorded at El Pilar where occupation extended into the Postclassic. This was the time when the once magnificent rooms, such as the Zotz Na of El Pilar, were apparently converted to exotic dump sites for flutes and figurines, as mere reflections of the center's past glory.



Ancient Maya Writing on stone



Tikal, Peten, Guatemala

Today, the inspiring temples, open public plazas, and restricted palaces enigmatically rise above the forest canopy in the Yucatan of Mexico, Petén of Guatemala, and in Cayo, Belize. Ancient monuments at Tikal, Uxmal, Chichén Itza, Tulum, and El Pilar represent once prospering cities. These ancient sites are all archaeological reserves where visitors from near and far are invited to witness this past glory. Discovered in 1983, El Pilar is the core of a new bi-national park and living museum of Belize and Guatemala. There, a new kind of conservation practice is being promoted that showcases the Maya forest garden as the rich, biodiverse traditional Maya agricultural system that underwrote the ancient Maya civilization, conserving nature and building prosperity.



Uxmal, Yucatan, Mexico

Reflecting on the Mundo Maya

A journey into Mesoamerica and the Maya area of Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize provides a rich experience of the varied geography of volcanic highlands and forested lowlands, giving a context to that which is at once traditional and modern. Throughout the area, traditional Maya and their cultural traditions are ever present. Women wear their vibrant native blouses, or huipiles, which change pattern based on geographic location. Fruits of the forest abound in the markets, and typical meals can be found at local restaurants. These traditions, among others, are part of the rich cultural history that characterizes the area.

Today, the stamp of the Spanish Colonial architecture can be enjoyed from Merida, Mexico to Antigua, Guatemala. Belize, with its long Barrier Reef provides a British contrast. Throughout this diverse region, enchanting sights and sounds mingling Spanish, Mayan, and English Creole present a colorful backdrop of experiences in which to discover and learn of Maya prehistory and the ancient traditions that still flourish today.

“Lions, Statues and Treaties: Recent Discoveries at Tell Tayinat in the North Orontes Valley”

By Dr. Timothy P. Harrison

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Summary by Riva Daniel



Timothy P. Harrison is a professor of Near Eastern Archaeology at the Department of Near and Middle East Civilizations at the University of Toronto since 2007. He is the president of the American Schools of Oriental Research since 2008 and his research interests include Near East, Bronze & Iron Age Civilizations. He is the director of the Tell Tayinat Archaeological Project and has authored several books and articles in international refereed journals.

On the eve of January 30th, the Society of Friends of the AUB Museum and the Department of History and Archaeology at AUB, invited Dr. Harrison to present the University of Toronto’s Tell Tayinat Excavation project. The lecture was an overview of the results of the ongoing excavations and what these results imply in regards to Iron Age society in the Northern Levant and its development during that time period.

Dr. Harrison began his interesting lecture by showing a map of the north Orontes Valley and the Plain of Antioch pointing out the location of several important archaeological sites including Tell Tayinat. Tell Tayinat is located on the Plain of Antioch in the North Orontes Valley along the principal transit routes that passed right along Tell Atchana; Tayinat sister site. The site was previously excavated between 1935 and

1938 by the University of Chicago over four field seasons. The finds of the Chicago expedition were evidence that the site was settled from the Early Bronze (ca. 3000-2000 BC) to the Iron Age (ca. 1200-550 BC) periods. The main architectural finds of the Chicago excavations were several large bit-hilani palaces (an ancient architectural type of palace which became popular in the Early Iron Age (end of 10th-9th c. BC) in northern Syria) and a temple. They also uncovered a beautifully carved column base, a colossus head and a double lion column base. In addition to a large number of carved stone reliefs and sculptures, the Chicago Expedition discovered numerous inscriptions in Luwian/Neo Hittite, Neo-Assyrian and Aramaic writing. These inscriptions helped identifying the site as ancient Kunulua, capital of the Neo Hittite/Aramaean Kingdom of Patina/Unqi.



Bit hilani Palace Complex



Column Base