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Oldest Preserved Maya Mural Reveals Mythology Of Kings And Highly Developed Hieroglyphs

Earliest Known Maya Royal Tomb Also Found at Guatemalan Site

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Editors: A bio of William Saturno is available; contact Erika Mantz. For photographs, contact National Geographic picture editor Eduardo Rubiano, erubiano@ngs.org, (202) 857-7760. B roll is available.

WASHINGTON/GUATEMALA CITY — Archaeologists at an ancient Maya ceremonial site in Guatemala have uncovered the final wall of a large Maya mural dating from 100 B.C. that shows the mythology surrounding the origin of kings and a highly developed hieroglyphic script. Before the excavation of the vividly painted mural, there was scant evidence of the existence of early Maya kings or of their use of elaborate art and writing to establish their right to rule.

The site, known as San Bartolo, contains a pyramid complex and several buried rooms. To the west of the pyramid where the mural room was discovered, archaeologists led by Guatemalan Mónica Pellecer Alecio found the oldest known Maya royal burial, from around 150 B.C. The latest finds at the site will be reported in the January 2006 issue of National Geographic magazine.

Project director William Saturno, of the University of New Hampshire and Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, said the mural room's recently excavated west wall is a masterpiece of ancient Maya art that reveals the story of creation, the mythology of kingship and the divine right of a king. The 30-foot by 3-foot west wall mural shows two coronation scenes — one mythological, the other the coronation of a real king.

Archaeologists have determined the mural is about 200 years older than originally thought. As previously announced, Saturno found the mural room in 2001 through sheer chance. To seek some shade, he had ducked into a trench that looters had cut into the unexcavated pyramid, and when he shone his flashlight on the walls, he saw the mural. Saturno and his team are now in the midst of a five-year project to uncover the mural and reveal its story.

“In Western terms, it's like knowing only modern art and then stumbling on a Michelangelo or a Leonardo,” Saturno, 36, said. “With its fine painting and its elaborate mural showing the mythic

basis of kingship, the chamber has upended much of what we thought we knew about the early Maya. The mural shows that early Maya painting had achieved a high level of sophistication and grace well before the great works of the Classic Maya in the seventh century.”

The mural is wonderfully preserved. Parts of it look like they were painted yesterday, Saturno noted.

The work at San Bartolo has been supported by grants from the National Geographic Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Peabody Museum, the Annenberg Foundation and the Reinhart Foundation. The work is authorized by the Guatemalan Institute of Anthropology and History.

“It is in the interest of the Guatemalan state to support the archaeological research, the mural restoration and conservation program undertaken by Dr. Saturno and his team. We are also interested in implementing a conservation project with the objective of preserving the murals,” said Ervin S. López Aguilar, director of the Department of Prehispanic Monuments.

The first part of the west wall mural shows the establishment of order to the world. Four deities, variations of the same figure — the son of the maize god — provide a blood sacrifice and an offering in four cardinal directions as they set up the physical world. The deities move through the Maya universe. The first god stands in the water and offers a fish, establishing the watery underworld. The second stands on the ground and sacrifices a deer, establishing the land. The third floats in the air, offering a turkey, thereby establishing the sky; and the fourth stands in a field of flowers, offering fragrant blossoms, the food of gods, and establishing paradise in the east, where the sun is reborn daily.

The next section of the mural shows the maize god establishing the world center and crowning himself king upon a wooden scaffold. The final section traces his birth, death and resurrection, bringing sustenance to the world. The last scene shows a historic coronation of a Maya king, named and titled, receiving his headdress from an attendant. By acceding to the throne in the company of gods, the mural likely shows the king is claiming the divine right to rule from the gods themselves.

Project iconographer Karl Taube of the University of California, Riverside, said the San Bartolo murals provide an unparalleled view of the early development of Maya mythology and art. “All too often such carvings are broken or heavily eroded,” he said. “In contrast, the murals at San Bartolo are in brilliant polychrome and extend for many meters along the chamber walls. Elaborate red spirals indicate wind, breath and aroma and can be seen exhaling from the mouths of serpents and other beings, and at the edge of bird wings to denote movement. The maize god appears no less than seven times in the currently exposed portion of the mural, giving us an unprecedented understanding of his attributes and mythology at this early date.”

Although painted almost 1,500 years after the San Bartolo murals, the Maya book known as the Dresden Codex features a very similar sequence of directional trees and sacrificial offerings.

Because the surviving glyphs within the mural room date to centuries before most other Maya texts (of the Classic period), they remain hard to read. David Stuart, Schele Professor of Mesoamerican Art & Writing at the University of Texas at Austin, who is working on deciphering them, says they are probably captions for the figures they accompany. One legible example from the west wall shows one of the sacrificing young gods named by his accompanying caption as “star man.” “It’s enigmatic, but emphasizes his cosmological role within the larger creation myth represented,” Stuart said.

About a mile from the mural room, Mónica Pellecer Alecio's team of archaeologists excavated beneath a small pyramid and found a vaulted tomb under heavy capstones, likely the burial place of one of the early Maya kings. The tomb contained a burial complex. The first part housed five ceramic vessels; the second, some human bones and six ceramic vessels; the third, the bones of a man, with a jade plaque — the symbol of Maya royalty — on his chest, plus a large, green stone figurine and seven vessels, including a delicate frog-shaped bowl and a vase bearing an effigy of the rain god Chac.

During the past year, archaeologists working nearby the mural room have found remains of two other rooms, one that faced the mural room and one on top of the pyramid, as well as thousands of mural fragments, more than 9,000 from a small excavation near the top room alone. In these fragments, the painting is finer and the figures smaller and more intricate. Saturno and his team hope to be able to piece the fragments together to get a sense of what these murals show.

“The artistic and physical evidence of the Maya's earliest kings revealed at San Bartolo is among the most important finds in Maya archaeology in the last few decades,” Saturno said. “It has opened a window into the very origins of Maya civilization. As we excavate the site further and piece together more images and glyphs from the mural fragments we have discovered, new surprises could be revealed.”