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"Maya Worlds: on-site in Chiapas, Guatemala, Honduras and Belize"

-- Project Rationale

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The Maya culture area today is divided by the modern boundaries of southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Belize, each of which has important examples of ancient Maya ruins of different periods and styles, distinctive contemporary Maya communities, and important Spanish colonial monuments. The inclusion of Belize in our 2006 schedule offers an opportunity to study the interactions of Maya communities not only with Spanish-speaking populations but with Creole Anglophone and Garifuna, or Afro-Caribbean, groups as well. The Maya, creators of one of the great ancient New World civilizations and the only pre-Columbian phonetic writing system, endure today, despite centuries of colonialism, development projects, and tourism, as a dynamic living culture of over seven million people.

What we know about the Maya places them in a very special category of study. Most familiarly, the ancient Maya, along with the much later Inca and Aztecs, were the creators of one of the most sophisticated urban civilizations of the pre-Columbian world, whose urban ceremonial centers are among the most impressive archaeological ruins anywhere in the world. While the origins of Maya culture go back some four thousand years, what has traditionally been called the Classic Maya era, we now know, extended approximately from the

first through the ninth centuries -- in terms of Western Civilization chronology, from the time of Caesar Augustus, through the ages of Augustine, Mohammed and Charlemagne. This nine-hundred year period saw the rise and fall of numerous city-states and the creation of such well-known monumental urban centers as Tikal, Copán, and Palenque and other lesser-known but important regional centers such as Quiriguá, Bonampak, Yaxchilán and Cahal Pech -- all of which will be subjects of field study in our project. These urban centers, of from ten to forty thousand people, have been the focus of intensive archaeological study ever since their "rediscovery" in the mid-19th century, addressing such complex issues as state formation and the nature of Classic Maya political organization.

Moreover, the Classic Maya, in addition to being masters of one of the world's most sophisticated and accurate calendars, were fully literate, with a phonetic, and not just "hieroglyphic," writing system that is now is largely decipherable. Uniquely, the Maya present us with a documentary Native American history of almost a millennium, with inscriptions ranging from fragmentary first-century artifacts, through detailed astronomical and historical texts carved in stone and painted on walls, to ceramic vessels and bark-paper codices up through the ninth century. These writings have yielded a detailed chronicle of the rulers of each Maya city-state, with records of parentage, accession rituals, marriage, warfare and sacrificial rites. Thus, as Linda Schele and David Friedel put it in *A Forest of Kings* (1990), now "we can offer a history unique in the Precolumbian Americas, populated with real people . . . and magnificent personal artistic and intellectual expression. . . . *It is important that we acknowledge this history, because only then will a true picture of the Americas emerge*" (18, our emphasis). Written American history begins, then, not with the journals of European explorers but with the chronicles of Maya rulers written in stone over fifteen hundred years ago. On site, our Institute scholars William Fash, Peter Harrison, Federico Fahsen, and Alfonso Morales and Julie Miller will demonstrate for Institute participants the panorama of classic Maya royal history displayed, billboard-like, on the monuments of Copán, Tikal, Palenque and in the Museum of Anthropology in Guatemala City.

The subsequent so-called "collapse" of classic Maya civilization was marked by the cessation of written inscriptions, and of most monumental architecture

as well, except in the Yucatán, where monumental building continued for several more centuries. Academics and pundits continue to debate the causes of this "collapse" of classic Maya civilization, analyzed in scholarly detail by Arthur Demarest in *Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest* (2004), and David Webster in *The Fall of the Ancient Maya* (2002), and prominently referenced in Jared Diamond's controversial popular book *"Collapse": How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2004). There is, however, no question that, as Michael Coe emphasizes in the opening pages of his classic study, *The Maya* (7th ed., 2005), "The Maya are hardly a vanished people, for they number at least seven-and-a-half million souls, the largest single block of American Indians north of Peru." An early bishop of Guatemala once commented on the "invincible tenacity" of the Maya, and anthropologists and ethnographers today give special attention to the forms and expression of what Institute scholar Matthew Restall and Ueli Hostetler call, in their recent anthology of the same name, "Maya Survivalism" (*Acta Mesoamericana* Vol. 12, 2001).

A crucial exposition of this new emphasis on survivalism is the recent book *Maya Intellectual Renaissance/ Identity, Representation, and Leadership* by Victor Montejo, one of our Institute faculty, who is the first Maya person to hold a Ph.D. in anthropology from an American university. Our schedule includes several other Maya writers, including the first Maya novelist, Gaspar Pedro González, and poet Maya Cu. We will also meet with two Maya theater companies, the campesino theater group *Sna Jtz'bajam* and the Maya women's theater group FOMMA, both based in San Cristóbal, Mexico.

The complex, ongoing interweaving of continuity and change and of new critical perspectives in Maya cultural studies indeed calls for an unusually wide-ranging interdisciplinary approach to Maya studies, as archaeologists, epigraphers, linguists, art historians, archivists and ethnographers now increasingly depend upon each other's work and, as noted, upon the collaboration of Maya intellectuals, elders and communities. Our "Maya Worlds" Institute strives to disseminate this current leading scholarship on pre-Columbian and modern Maya culture by means of the learning community that will be constituted by the collaboration of the selected participants and the visiting scholars.