



The Summer of 1972:  
Fifty Years Before Covid

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Archaeologists are famed for their resilience, but the COVID-19 pandemic has given everyone a taste of the many challenges that Maya researchers have always faced in the field. Health and safety issues—ensuring potable water, securely storing foodstuffs, making hurried trips to town to take a field member to see a doctor—are not new. Nor is the threat of disease or the value of preventative measures. Vaccines are par for the course; most of us have had jabs for tetanus, typhoid, cholera, and yellow fever. Some of us have dealt with painful botflies that mature within one’s body until they are ready to pop out; others have had extensive treatments for leishmaniasis, commonly known as “chicoler’s ulcer,” an ever-expanding sore that does not heal without medical intervention. Most of us have taken malaria tablets every field season. And some of us have been forced to change our research plans because of political unrest. Yet no world event halted Maya research efforts as much as COVID-19. While the severest impact of this pandemic has obviously been on the health and well-being of people worldwide, it has also disrupted travel and global economics in a way that has not occurred in recent memory.

Many archaeologists were unable to have field seasons during 2020, and 2021 promises to be no different. This loss is not only felt by the researchers. It has a great impact on the local populations who lose employment and also spreads economic hardship across countries dealing with the loss of tourism and limited global exchange. While the full 36th field season of the Caracol Archaeological Project was successfully conducted from January through March of 2020, we left Belize the day before they shut down their international airport for over six months, effectively cutting their economic lifeline to the rest of the world. The United States that we returned to at the end of March was also greatly changed—empty airports and planes, no toilet paper or paper towels, grocery stores with empty shelves, stay-at-home orders, masks, and online meetings and instruction.

The inability to go to the field in the spring of 2021 has led me to think back to my first serious medical predicament in the field—and the differences between the two experiences are telling.

My initial year of undergraduate study at the University of Pennsylvania ended in May 1972, and I planned to exit Philadelphia and do something else during the summer. Not having much in the way of available funds, I was determined to pursue my interests in Maya archaeology in the easiest and least costly way possible. My high school mentor and teacher, Merle Greene Robertson, had told me that I was welcome to stay at her house in Palenque, Mexico. So, that was where I intended to go first; from there I hoped to travel to Guatemala.

During my senior year at Robert Louis Stevenson School in Pebble Beach, California, I had been lucky enough to spend four weeks in the jungles of the Peten in Guatemala with Merle, largely as a result of having taken a course with her on Mesoamerican archaeology in the fall of 1970. The term paper that I did for her was my first experience with academic review and critical editing—and has since served me well. Little known to (or understood by) any of her high school students, Merle was a major figure in Maya art history and was engaged in a program of producing rubbings of Maya monuments that provided detail far superior to most line drawings. She brought students with her to the field when she did this research during spring semester and sometimes in the summers. I desperately wanted to go with her, but funds were tight and I held out little hope of doing so. To my amazement, over the holidays that year my grandmother volunteered to pay for the trip as a high school graduation present—little knowing how it would impact the rest of my life. More than anything else, this excursion during the spring of 1971 caused me to realize how little archaeological research actually had been done in the vast spatial area that had once been occupied by the ancient Maya. It was a field in which a single individual could make a significant impact.

Merle had made such an impact in Maya art history through her conscientious program that undertook the recording of the actual, ancient Maya monuments through ink and rice paper. The Spring 1971 field program had been designed to permit her to record stone monuments at the site of Ixtutz in the southeast Peten of Guatemala. We flew into Guatemala City and stayed at the Hotel Pan American, a centrally located hotel that was once frequented

by diplomats. What left a lasting impression on me were the large (and very dated) pictures of Franklin Delano Roosevelt that hung on the walls of the hotel's bar. Our next stop was a short flight on a DC-3 airplane to the island city of Flores in the Peten. From there we visited ruins at Ceibal (or Seibal as it was then spelled) and then moved on to the site of Ixtutz. The time we spent camped at this small site resulted in the production of a map revealing a central area gridded with lines of rocks as well as the discovery of a multi-stone wall panel carved with Maya iconography that had been surrounded by a hieroglyphic text. After leaving Ixtutz we spent two days at Yaxha, Guatemala, where an archaeological project was in operation. Not wanting to have a bunch of high school kids in the middle of things, they herded us off to the lake causeway to open a small investigation; inexperienced and without supervision, we explored the intricacies of using archaeological excavation to interpret past events and ways of life. The heady experiences gained at both Ixtutz and Yaxha in the spring of 1971 further cemented my desire to undertake Maya archaeology.

The University of Pennsylvania was my choice for pursuing my vocation. Penn was well known because of their just-concluded Tikal Archaeological Project, and Merle informed me that the University Museum was about to start an archaeological project at the site of Tayasal in the Peten during that summer. I assumed this project would run for several years like the one at Tikal and allow undergraduate students to participate in the excavations. Neither assumption was valid. The University Museum did not take undergraduates on their archaeological projects at the time, and the investigations at Tayasal were undertaken only for the single 1971 field season. (However, they were substantial enough to eventually become my PhD dissertation.) No matter my preconceptions, Penn provided me with a full scholarship, and given its standing in Maya archaeology I was resolved to go there—especially after almost memorizing the 1959 publication by former Penn archaeologist (and director of the Tikal investigations) William R. Coe on the artifacts and caches of Piedras Negras, Guatemala.

Fast forward to the early summer of 1972. Having just completed my first year at Penn, I was chomping at the bit to get back

to the Maya area. So I headed for Palenque, eventually arriving at Merle's house where I was able to live for several weeks by slinging a hammock on the top floor of her building. The house was centrally located in a western neighborhood of Palenque on a street that was later named "Calle Merle Greene" in her honor. People were always coming through Palenque, and the summer of 1972 was no different. Merle was an excellent host, always able to rustle up cheese quesadillas with a fresh pico de gallo for whomever was visiting—and I was the grateful recipient of many such meals.

Two guests who came through Palenque that summer stood out in my mind. The first was a young archaeologist named Tony Andrews, with whom I bonded quite easily. I still remember him trying to get me out of my hammock to go on a midnight swim in the full moon at Nututun, some three miles south of Merle's house. When I groggily got down to his vehicle, there was quite a commotion as Moises Morales (a local resident and friend of Merle's—and perhaps the foremost tour guide of the ruins of ancient Palenque) was there extracting two young females (who were his extended family members) from Tony's car. Tony stood there watching this unfold, shrugged his shoulders, and then got into the car. Albeit without his intended female guests, Tony wove his way down the road to Nututun and we enjoyed our midnight swim. The second individual was an art historian named Linda Schele, who later helped revolutionize Maya epigraphy. Linda was a font of knowledge about iconography and hieroglyphs—and I eagerly listened to her discussions with Merle. Linda was in Palenque with her husband and a student en route to Guatemala, driving her own vehicle.

Since part of my original intention had been to return to Guatemala and to the ongoing field research at Yaxha, Merle arranged for Linda to give me a ride to that part of the world. We left Palenque and spent a night in Chetumal, crossing into Belize (then British Honduras) the next day. At the time it seemed unusual to have a country that spoke English in the middle of a sea of Spanish speakers (in later years I came to very much appreciate this phenomenon). After lunch in Belmopan, at the time a sleepy capital city in a country still under British control, we continued into

Guatemala past the large billboard the Guatemalans had erected proclaiming "Belice es nuestra" (Belize is ours). The road was not paved after the border town of Melchor de Mencos, but we soon reached the small, freshly bulldozed, dirt-road turnoff that led to Lake Yaxha, where Linda off-loaded me and my pack. Carrying all my possessions on my back, I then hiked into Yaxha, arriving just in time for a dinner of black beans and rice.

My arrival had been unexpected, but the director of the project, Nicholas Hellmuth (whom I had met the previous year), graciously permitted me to stay in his camp for the next two months. There were few archaeological projects in the Maya area willing to take students at this time. Many of the individuals who were present at Yaxha went on to become well-known figures in the field. It was here that I met Raymond Sidrys, who had earned his PhD at UCLA by studying the ancient Maya obsidian trade; he later carried out field research in northern Belize, presaging our own work at Santa Rita Corozal. Also present was Anabel Ford, who was engaged in the excavation of a residential group at Yaxha; she subsequently carried out a settlement survey between Yaxha and Tikal and then worked in eastern Belize at the site of El Pilar, defining the efficiency of Maya forest gardens. The changes that were ongoing in archaeology as it moved from a culture history to a culture process framework were being actively debated in 1972, and I fondly remember the attempts by Sidrys and Ford to apply the 1970 theoretical treatise written by Watson, Leblanc, and Redmond to structure their archaeological investigations. Also present during this field season were Don and Prudence Rice, both of whom carried out later settlement work around the Peten lakes and focused on the Postclassic Period; for this season, however, both were actively engaged in excavations in the Yaxha site epicenter. Among others whom I remember being present at Yaxha in 1972 were Patricia Plunkett (who subsequently carried out archaeological research in highland Mexico), Arlene Miller (now Arlene Rosen and well known in Near Eastern archaeology), Sara Velez (who subsequently worked with Dennis Puleston in Belize in 1974), and Maya Homics—all of whom I've had subsequent contact with over the years.

Being happily ensconced in the Yaxha camp, located high on a ridge above the lake waters, I was left to design my own schedule. This involved exploring most of the site of Yaxha that had been carefully gridded with survey instruments by Hellmuth to produce an updated map of the site. Most days, I was also free to explore the area around Lake Yaxha and hiked extensively in the jungle that encircled the lake, usually on my own. On some of these trips, I would encounter looted structures and find items that had been left behind, including a large hollow stone cylinder that once must have held an offering. Sidrys and I also canoed across Lake Yaxha to visit the Postclassic architectural remains of Topoxte on the islands in the western part of the lake, seeing many of the places reported by the earlier work of William Bullard. It was on this trip that my long hair (I was from California, after all) got caught up in a wasp's nest while I was pushing my way through the bush without using my machete. I had real issues getting the wasps out of my hair and was repeatedly (and painfully) stung; shortly afterwards, I cut off all my hair to ensure that something like that did not happen again. I also learned that it was not safe to be doing long-distance swimming in the waters of Lake Yaxha, especially after discovering that some of the "floating logs" in the distance turned out to be large alligators. No matter, in the evenings the project staff would descend from the camp ridge down to the lake in order to bathe, something made even more interesting by the fact that there was no beach but rather just muck that one sank into as one entered the water. Dinner was usually basic fare, almost always served with ketchup, and I kept good relations with the cook. One evening she served all the rest of the foreign staff the heads of the local fish caught in the lake for their meal, reserving two fillets for me; when my colleagues asked why they had received heads, she claimed that the heads had more flavor (the other fillets had gone to the Guatemalan excavators). All-in-all, that summer at Yaxha was unforgettable, serving to solidify my nascent interest in the ancient Maya and leading to an enduring interest in the Postclassic period.

Eventually it was time to return to the United States. It was the end of July and much of the camp was becoming ill. The drinking water had been collected from the lake and boiled. While the

outhouses were on the higher ground at the end of the ridge, just west of camp, it was suspected that somehow the water and fecal matter became combined and possibly not fully boiled. No matter the case, most of the Yaxha Project came down with hepatitis. At the time I wasn't sure what was wrong with me; I just knew that I was turning yellow and getting weaker each day. I took buses all the way back from the Peten to San Diego, California, eventually going to the local airport for a short flight to the Monterey Peninsula where my parents lived. As I was about to board the plane in San Diego, several uniformed guards removed me from the line and took me to a back room to be strip-searched to see if I had drugs; they actually held up the plane for me until they had finished (something they would not do today). The next day I had an appointment at the hospital at Fort Ord, California. As a military dependent (my father was retired military), I still had access to this medical system. They examined me, diagnosed hepatitis, and told me to rest and watch what I ate; they specifically forbade me to eat ice cream. Upon my return to Penn a few weeks later for my second year of undergraduate study, I was still fairly yellow and not feeling all that well. I went, therefore, to the naval hospital in Philadelphia. Again they told me that I had hepatitis and that I should rest and, yes, not eat ice cream. However, my future wife convinced me that I should get another opinion about how to recover from this illness. So I went to the Penn hospital on campus, where they immediately put me into isolation and quarantine for a week—the perfect ending to a surreal summer.

Despite this bout of hepatitis, I continued to carry out archaeological research in the Maya area, going to the field as often as was possible—something I still do today. Being located in a remote part of the Belizean “bush” and roughing it in a field camp has become a regularized lifestyle. Only COVID-19 changed this schedule. After carrying out investigations in Pennsylvania, Mexico, and the US Southwest, as well as multiple seasons at other sites in both Guatemala and Belize, for the first time in thirty-seven years there was no Spring 2021 field season at Caracol. Having a severe case of hepatitis was bad, but being yellow from hepatitis was almost a badge of honor for having carried out archaeological work in



the midst of rough field conditions. The pandemic that started in 2020 is far worse than any of the previous medical issues that I or others have faced. Besides limiting basic academic research, COVID-19 is affecting the very lives and livelihoods of the many locals in Belize and other Mesoamerican countries who rely on archaeological work and tourism for income. And while differences in opinion as to medical treatment (in the past and now) may still exist, today such disagreements (over the efficacy of masks, social distancing, and even the epidemic) have been transferred out of the medical realm and into the political arena—effectively prolonging the length of time that COVID-19 will distress populations. This pandemic will surely mark a transition point in the field of Maya studies. Whatever comes next, we will look back with nostalgia at what will probably be remembered as “the storied past” before 2020.