SPECIAL SECTION: NEW DIALOGUES ABOUT ANCIENT MAYA

Most people think of Maya civilisation, if they do at all, while on vacation. A daytrip from a beach takes them to ruins nearby, crowded with tourists in correct holiday gear. In the recent past, others might have grown anxious about the portentous significance of the year 2012. Maya glyphs, so the hucksters affirmed, predicted a cascade of dire events, not one of which (predictably) has come to pass. Then there are those living in Mayaland itself, an area embracing parts of Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador and all of Belize. Their personal identities stem in part from a sense of direct inheritance, extending to rights of ownership and interpretation.

Maya archaeology may have originated from the travels of Stephens and Catherwood and others in the nineteenth century, and it draws deeply from neocolonialism. Despite growing challenges of funding, it continues to thrust ahead, with excavations in all regions, directed at sites of all periods: Preclassic, Classic and Postclassic. Above all, Maya archaeology is robust, engaged and committed to deeper reflection about current and future states of the field. Its research questions about literacy in courtly societies; decoding ancient script and imagery; environmental ebb, flow and degradation; the matter of origins and endings; the material understandings of descendants: all have currency and significance beyond the Yucatán Peninsula. But who to ask about current craft and its results? A census of Maya specialists might identify hundreds of people, some employed by governments, a few in museums, many in universities. Their training and research emphases vary greatly, and there still remain different spheres of literature or training.



Effigy tamale bowl of mythic howler monkey, c. *AD 370, Burial 9, El Zotz, Guatemala. Photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara, Proyecto Arqueológico El Zotz.*

Mindful of that diversity, yet also of limited space and an Anglophone readership, this special section probes the field through a set of 'conversations' on themes of high topicality in Maya archaeology. The frictions and felicities of having more than one voice seemed useful. Obliging us, colleagues in art history, historical archaeology, ethnography, geography and settlement study have paired up to offer this selective assay of the field.

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