

Advertisement

NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.COM

Site Index | Subscribe | Shop | Search

Go



# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC NEWS

REPORTING OUR WORLD DAILY

Top 15 Most Popular Stories

## NEWS

- [Front Page](#)
- [Photo in the News](#)
- [Video in the News](#)
- [Animals & Nature](#)
- [Archaeology & Paleontology](#)
- [Environment](#)
- [History & Culture](#)
- [Science & Space](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Offbeat](#)
- [Travel & Adventure](#)

## SPECIAL SERIES

- [The Geographic Project](#)
- [Pulse of the Planet](#)
- [National Geographic Channel](#)

## RESOURCES

- [XML](#) [RSS](#)
- [What's this?](#)
- [Contact Us](#)

Front Page > [Archaeology & Paleontology](#)

## Earliest Maya Writing Found in Guatemala, Researchers Say

Nicholas Bakalar for [National Geographic News](#)  
January 5, 2006

Evidence of Maya writing that dates to 2,300 years ago has turned up in a pyramidal structure in Guatemala.

Researchers excavating the site—ruins at San Bartolo in the northeastern part of the country—say the finding could be among the earliest Maya written material ever found.

Currently the oldest known writing system in all of Central and South America dates to about 400 B.C. and is from cultures based in what is now Oaxaca, Mexico.

But William Saturno, the lead researcher reporting the find, points out that this "largely depends on what your definition of writing is—that is, the very first symbols, the first calendric signs, the first full-blown text, et cetera."

Saturno, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of New Hampshire, and colleagues describe the Maya hieroglyphs in today's *Science Express*, the online advance version of the research journal *Science*. Their research at the San Bartolo site is partially funded by the National Geographic Society.

"The story of script invention in Mesoamerica is likely to get more and more complicated in the near future as more early texts from excavations in the Maya area come to light," Saturno said.

### An Unusual Find

The ruins, which were discovered in 2001, consist of several buildings constructed at different times. In April 2005 Saturno was working in one part of the site while his colleague Boris Beltrán, of the University of San Carlos in Guatemala, worked in another, older section of the excavation.

"We're in a room built around 100 B.C. working on some murals," Saturno recalled, "and Boris was in a tunnel far deeper in the pyramid, going back further in time—about four construction phases earlier than where the murals are."

Beltrán was working on defining the shapes and dimensions of the entire structure so he could see how the complex grew over time.

"One day Boris turns up some painting," Saturno said, "and he says, You should come back here. And I thought, Yeah, sure Boris—it had become a running joke, because we kept finding fragments of mural everywhere."

### TODAY'S MOST POPULAR STORY

[Life Is Confusing For Two-Headed Snakes](#)

Advertisement



A column of ten hieroglyphs (seen pictured at left) found at an ancient temple in Guatemala could be among the earliest Maya written material ever discovered.

A drawing of the characters (seen pictured at right) offers a clearer view of the glyphs. Scientists say at least one glyph means "lord" or "ruler," but the rest are difficult to decipher.

Images © Science; Photograph by B. Beltrán, drawing by D. Stuart



### Magazine Savings

Get one year of *National Geographic* for only \$15.

[SUBSCRIBE »](#)

### RELATED STORIES

- [Maya Murals May Depict Murder of Royal Scribes](#)
- [Inca Tax Records Were Tied Up in Knots, Study Says](#)
- [Oldest Known Maya Mural, Tomb Reveal Story of Ancient King](#)

Search

### RELATED WEB SITES

- [University of Michigan](#)
- [University of Texas at Austin](#)
- [University of San Carlos](#)

"So I walked back into this tunnel, climbed the stairway on the back side of the building he's been excavating, and I look. And he's there with a big block with a painting of the [Maya] maize god on it [from] a couple of hundred years earlier than what we've been looking at.

**CONTINUED 1 | 2** [Next >>](#)

**MOST POPULAR STORIES**  
[Life Is Confusing For Two-Headed Snakes](#)




The two-headed monsters of myth may have a basis in reality. Two-headed snakes a...

 [Top Ten Videos of 2005 From National Geographic News](#)  
Replay the year in science, nature, and exploration with the ten most popular vi...

 [Photo in the News: New Lemur Species Discovered](#)  
Two new lemur species—one a "good man" and one a squirrel-size "child"—...

- [University of New Hampshire](#)

**ARTICLE TOOLS**

-  [E-mail This Story](#)
-  [Sign up for Newsletters](#)
-  [Reprints/Permissions](#)

**SHOP NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC**

 **Inside 9/11 DVD Set**  
Go beyond what has been reported for a clearer picture of the day that redefined America.  
**\$29.95** [SHOP OUR STORE »](#)

**SPECIAL OFFER, SAVE 74%**

**Order National Geographic Magazine**  
U.S. PRICE IS ONLY **\$15**  
**12 Monthly Issues**  
SEND NO MONEY NOW!



Fill in all fields.

Name

Address  City

State

Zip Code  E-mail

I would like to receive regular e-mail updates.

 [For Gift Orders, Click Here](#)    [For International Orders, Click Here](#)

Offer applies to U.S. and Canadian addresses only. Savings based on annual U.S. newsstand price of \$59.40. Canadian price C\$20 (\$17 U.S.), including GST. Sales tax will be added where applicable. Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery. While all dues support National Geographic's mission of expanding geographic knowledge, 90 percent is designated for the magazine subscription, and no portion should be considered a charitable contribution.

**Sponsored Links**

[Environmental Education](#)  
Offering summer, overnight, and expedition camps for youth in Virginia. Group adventures include rock climbing, caving, kayaking, and whitewater rafting.  
[www.adventurelinks.net](http://www.adventurelinks.net)

[Environmental Education](#)  
EnviroEducation.com - compare over 2,300 environmental degree programs and schools. Student guidance, career info, and more.  
[www.enviroeducation.com](http://www.enviroeducation.com)

[Environmental Education Online](#)  
Amuê™'s Environmental Studies program offers online courses in environmental policy, law, management, disaster, parks and recreation management, public land management, economics and more.  
[www.apu.apus.edu](http://www.apu.apus.edu)

[Healthy Building Institute of America](#)  
HBIA offers nationally approved and state accredited training and certification courses for mold inspection, remediation and project management. US EPA advisory committee member.  
[www.healthy-buildings.net](http://www.healthy-buildings.net)

[Environmental Education Tabletop Models](#)  
EnviroScape - environmental resource tabletop models for nonpoint source pollution, groundwater, hazardous waste, wetlands, landfill and coastal education.  
[www.scientificsoftwaregroup.com](http://www.scientificsoftwaregroup.com)

Advertisement

**NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.COM**

[Site Index](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Shop](#) | Search

Go



# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC NEWS

[Top 15 Most Popular Stories](#)

REPORTING OUR WORLD DAILY

**NEWS**

- [Front Page](#)
- [Photo in the News](#)
- [Video in the News](#)
- [Animals & Nature](#)
- [Archaeology & Paleontology](#)
- [Environment](#)
- [History & Culture](#)
- [Science & Space](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Offbeat](#)
- [Travel & Adventure](#)

**SPECIAL SERIES**

- [The Genographic Project](#)
- [Pulse of the Planet](#)
- [National Geographic Channel](#)

**RESOURCES**

- [XML](#) [RSS](#)
- [\(What's this?\)](#)
- [Contact Us](#)

[Front Page](#) > [Archaeology & Paleontology](#)

## Earliest Maya Writing Found in Guatemala, Researchers Say

[<< Back](#) | [1](#) | [2](#)

"And there's this text, just sitting there, and it's clear as day, so distinct from the glyphs we've seen even at 100 B.C."

The researchers did radiocarbon dating on five charcoal samples from deposits found in three layers of the site. Samples from the area where the writing was found dated to approximately 400 to 200 B.C.

Taken together with other radiocarbon dates from the site, the authors have concluded that the text was written between 300 and 200 B.C.—placing writing among the Maya much closer to the earliest known writing systems from other Mesoamerican cultures.

David Stuart, a study co-author, said, "The newly found San Bartolo text is the earliest example of Maya writing with firm, scientific dating." Stuart is a professor of Mesoamerican art at the University of Texas at Austin.

"It is also tantalizingly close to the earliest dates we have for writing in Mesoamerica as a whole, around 400 to 300 B.C. in Oaxaca. The find simply suggests that the Maya had writing about as early as anyone else in Mesoamerica."

### What Does the Writing Say?

There are ten hieroglyphs on the column, and the writing appears to be the end of a text that began above it. Whoever wrote the text was very careful: The scribe first painted a thin pinkish-orange outline before laying on a thick black line.

The meaning, the authors report, as with all Mayan writing, is difficult to decipher. There is one character that clearly means "lord" or "ruler" that probably was part of a phrase referring to a specific person or mythological character.

Otherwise the writing consists of abstract shapes. While the exact meaning remains obscure, the scientists believe the text provides a look at the form Maya writing took in its earliest stages.

What the find means for the history of writing in all of Mesoamerica is not yet clear, but experts are intrigued.

"Every early find of Maya writing is important, and this is very exciting," said Joyce Marcus, professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan. "There will be tremendous interest."

**Free E-Mail News Updates**  
[Sign up for our Inside National Geographic newsletter.](#)  
 Every two weeks we'll send you our top stories and

**TODAY'S MOST POPULAR STORY**

[Life Is Confusing For Two-Headed Snakes](#)

Advertisement



A column of ten hieroglyphs (seen pictured at left) found at an ancient temple in Guatemala could be among the earliest Maya written material ever discovered.

A drawing of the characters (seen pictured at right) offers a clearer view of the glyphs. Scientists say at least one glyph means "lord" or "ruler," but the rest are difficult to decipher.

Images © Science; Photograph by B. Beltrán, drawing by D. Stuart



**Magazine Savings**

Get one year of *National Geographic* for only \$15.

[SUBSCRIBE »](#)

**RELATED STORIES**

- [Maya Murals May Depict Murder of Royal Scribes](#)
- [Inca Tax Records Were Tied Up in Knots, Study Says](#)
- [Oldest Known Maya Mural, Tomb Reveal Story of Ancient King](#)

Search

**RELATED WEB SITES**

- [University of Michigan](#)
- [University of Texas at Austin](#)
- [University of San Carlos](#)