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## Stunning discoveries advance Maya study

**By John Noble Wilford**  
The New York Times

For archaeologists, the digging this season has been especially good at remote Maya ruins in the jungles of Guatemala.

Beneath a royal palace in the ancient city of Waka, they made a rare discovery: the tomb of a Maya queen who reigned more than 1,200 years ago. The royal skeleton rested on a stone platform, surrounded by fineries of wealth and power like pearls, obsidian, crown jewels of carved jade and the remains of what appeared to be the queen's war helmet.

At the 8th-century city of Cancuen, archaeologists uncovered a stone panel decorated with beautiful images and inscriptions carved in high relief. Experts described the panel, portraying ceremonies at the royal ball court, as a masterpiece of Maya art.

In the ruins of another ancient city, archaeologists found new evidence showing that the Maya civilization began reaching levels of grandeur and cultural complexity hundreds of years earlier than had been thought. Before 150 B.C., the city of Cival had many attributes of the later classic period: kings, elaborate iconography, writing and imposing ceremonial architecture.

The new discoveries, scholars say, promise to deliver new insights into the last glory years of the classic Maya period, which ended around A.D. 900, and should push back its beginnings well before the usual date of A.D. 250. The last centuries of the preclassic period can no longer be characterized as almost entirely a culture of simple farming villages.

Guatemalan officials announced this month the findings at Waka and Cival by excavation teams from Southern Methodist University and Vanderbilt University, respectively. Another Vanderbilt group reported the new research at Cancuen last month.

One of the most resplendent pre-Columbian civilizations, the Maya flourished through much of Central America, with cities of towering pyramids and broad plazas centered mostly in Guatemala and southern Mexico. Nearly all of them lay in jungle-covered ruin by the time the Spanish arrived in the early 16th century.

Waka appears to have reached its peak of power in northwestern Guatemala in the classic period between 400 and 800. In February, while digging a trench at the palace there, David Lee, a graduate student at Southern Methodist in Dallas, suddenly broke through the roof of a tomb.

"We were surprised," said David Freidel, an anthropology professor at SMU, in a telephone interview. "We weren't looking for a tomb there because, in usual practice, royal tombs are associated with pyramids, not palaces."

The tomb chamber measured 11 feet long, 5 feet wide and 6 feet high. The archaeologists found a woman's skeleton, minus the skull and femur bones. Perhaps, they said, these had been removed as part of a ritual ceremony.

The tomb yielded no clues to the woman's name; no inscriptions were found. Pottery indicated that she had probably lived between 650 and 750, and other artifacts suggested her high rank.

A jade carving depicting the head of a deity, for example, reminded archaeologists of the kind of jewels Maya

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kings and queens had in their crowns. Other jade pieces appeared to be part of a battle helmet. And stingray spines in the tomb were intriguing. Maya kings were known to use the spines to pierce their genitals in ceremonies in which they offered their blood to the gods.

"For this female ruler to have these implements supports the idea that in ancient Maya culture, gender roles were sometimes blended," Lee said in a statement issued by SMU.

Elsewhere, the archaeologists found a stone monument with the carved portrait of a queen at Waka who ruled at about this time. The inscription called her a "supreme warlord." It is not clear whether this queen and the woman in the tomb are one and the same, the archaeologists said.

"This tomb will help us understand how women shared power with men in ruling their kingdoms," said Freidel, co-director of the project with Hector Escobedo of the University of San Carlos in Guatemala.

Stone monuments were also telling discoveries at Cancuen, on the Pasion River in northern Guatemala. Excavations there are directed by Arthur A. Demarest of Vanderbilt in Nashville.

Digging at the royal ball court, archaeologists discovered an altar stone depicting the great 8th-century king, Taj Chan Ahk, engaged in a ceremonial game with visiting rulers. It is the third such altar stone found at Cancuen.

The royal ball games and monuments that portray them, Demarest said, were "really 'photo opportunities' celebrating the creation of alliances between the lord of Cancuen and vassal kings and nobles."

In other excavations there, the team found a well-preserved stone panel with images of rulers and inscriptions. Federico Fahsen, a Guatemalan expert in Mayan script, called the panel "one of the greatest masterpieces of Maya art ever discovered in Guatemala."

Investigating the much earlier preclassic city of Cival, another Vanderbilt team explored the dank interior of the main pyramid and came upon two huge carved masks. The stucco objects, 15 feet by 9 feet, appeared to be identical anthropomorphic images of the Maya maize god, probably used as the backdrop for elaborate rituals in about 150 B.C.

Francisco Estrada-Belli, a Vanderbilt archaeologist, also reported finding a carved stone monument from 300 B.C. depicting the accession of a king whose name has not yet been determined. Such carved scenes and inscriptions were common in classic Maya cities, but rare in earlier times. Indeed, the archaeologist said, this is probably the oldest known carved portrait of a Maya king.

Further excavations and detailed mapping of the site have convinced experts that Cival was one of the earliest and largest preclassic cities and had attained the power and grandeur usually associated with the classic Maya civilization. They said the established chronological framework of Maya history may have to be revised.

Ian Graham, an authority on Maya inscriptions at Harvard, said an understanding of the transition from the preclassic to classic Maya civilization was in flux. "We've still got a lot to learn," he said. "Thank goodness."

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