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Stolen Mayan altar recovered

An elaborately-carved Maya altar more than 1,200 years old has been recovered from looters in Guatemala after a joint investigation by archaeologists, police and village elders.



The altar had been buried for more than 1,000 years

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Stolen Mayan altar recovered

An elaborately-carved Maya altar more than 1,200 years old has been recovered from looters in Guatemala after a joint investigation by archaeologists, police and village elders.

The 600-pound (270-kg) altar, which had been missing for two years, has been hailed as a masterpiece of Mayan art.

It was erected in the year 796 in the city of Cancuen, at the site of one of the Mayans' largest royal palaces.

But after the demise of the Mayan civilisation, it lay unknown and undisturbed until 2001, when a rainstorm washed away layers of dirt that had been covering it.

A local gang of looters spotted it and hauled it away on a boat.

In an effort to find a buyer, they took photographs of the altar and distributed them, but an offer of \$4,000 by local drug traffickers was rejected as insufficient.

At that point, confusion set in as different groups of looters and drug traffickers fought for possession of the altar.

After a group of masked men raided a village near the site in a fruitless search for the artefact, village elders alerted archaeologists, who teamed up with Guatemalan federal police to track down the altar.

Mayan endgame

The altar depicts Cancuen's greatest king, Taj Chan Ahk Ah Kalomte, playing handball with another king in a ritual formalisation of an alliance.

It was originally placed at one end of the royal ball court.

"The importance of the altar is scientific and archaeological, and it happens also to be a masterpiece of Mayan art," said archaeologist Arthur Demarest, who has worked with the local Maya for more than 20 years.

"It really talks about the end, the final days of this kingdom, and its greatest king, its last great king."

The inscriptions on the altar are still being analysed by another expert, Federico Fahsen, who said they bore witness to Taj Chan Ahk's aspirations to expand his authority at a time when most other Maya kingdoms were collapsing.



Federico Fahsen is analysing the text on the altar

Historians say they hope that text on the altar will reveal much about the end of the Mayan civilisation.

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