

Where the stelae speak

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Calakmul, the city with the greatest number of stelae in Maya territory, faithfully reflects the level of perfection in stone sculpting achieved by our ancestors; this art reached its highest point after 500 A.D. The inscriptions in stone, of invaluable documentary value, relate the deeds of men who in order to survive resorted to war, matrimonial alliances, conquest and even self-sacrifice.

While, thanks to advances in epigraphic studies, we now know the names of various rulers in the Maya area, as well as the relations established between them, questions remain about the political-institutional life of many of these settlements.

Was Jaguar Claw, an important person born in Calakmul whose name is inscribed on stelae in various important sites, a dignitary whose ancestors came originally from this region?

Was the city of the "twin hills" (the meaning of *Calak*) an important political capital?

Is Calakmul the "Q Site" referred to in the inscriptions in El Perú, Dos Pilas and Tikal? Due to the poor condition of these monuments, epigraphers have not yet accepted such an association.

In order to be completely sure, the emblem glyph showing a serpent's head would have to be found on some of the walls and stairways of main buildings, as well as on stelae, says Ramón Carrasco. Since 1993, Carrasco has been in charge of salvage and research work in an area where

questions of dynastic history, evolution and development have been most enigmatic.

Up to the present, traces of the glyph have been found only on a polychrome vase and a fragment of a stairway, but not on any of the 120 stelae which line the city's roadways.

When the past reveals itself to us

Calakmul, considered one of the great cities of the Classic era, was one of the inheritors of the power of El Mirador (Guatemala), a city to the north of the central Maya area which was Tikal's great rival. Calakmul, first settled in the Late Pre-Classic period, expanded and flourished between the years 317 and 889 A.D. (that is, between 8.14.0.0.0 and 10.3.0.0.0. according to the Maya calendar).

This period of almost six centuries involved three hundred years of "expansion of the stelae, which were dated in Maya style, accompanied by a vaulted roof with projecting stones" and a period of "great activity and increasing refinement in architecture and the arts, at the same time that large religious buildings arose in the east and west regions of the central Maya area." The decline of that area began in the year 900, when the recording of Long Count inscriptions stopped and all organized religious activity ceased.¹

The zone was rediscovered a relatively short time ago. It was in 1931 that the American biologist

¹ Sylvanus G. Morley, *La civilización maya*, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, (2nd ed., 7th printing), 1989, pp. 74, 77.



Thirteen of Calakmul's buildings are pyramids.

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This bust may represent a Maya noble of the Classic period (250-800 A.D.).

Cyrus Lundell revealed the existence of this city, considered one of the largest in the Maya area.

Archeological salvage works began in 1982 under the direction of William J. Follan, a researcher from the University of Campeche (UAC). He carried out a study on the city's settlement pattern in order to get an idea of the size of the site, in which over 700 structures were found. The most important finds of the past decade—a tomb and one of the three jade masks now preserved in the Teniente del Rey Museum in the capital of Campeche—were discovered in Building VII, located in the central complex.

In October 1992, Calakmul became part of the Special Archeological Projects sponsored by the Presidency of the Republic. As part of the work program planned by the

project's director, "goals were set projecting over-all work on a group of structures and the establishment of their urban context, in order to provide a vision of the public areas as a whole."²

The Calakmul site is located in the Calakmul biosphere reserve, considered one of the country's largest with approximately 1.8 million acres of protected jungle. This area has the most important concentration of felines in all of North America. Jaguars, ocelots, wild cats, great anteaters as well as several species of monkeys and birds inhabit the reserve. In Calakmul there are trees of precious wood, including *ramonal*, *siricote*, *chakáh*, rubber trees, *chico zapote*, *palo mulato*, and *chechen negro*.

The zone, closed to tourism for the time being, is located about 250 miles southeast of the capital of Campeche, in the municipalities of Champotón and Holopchéén. On the Escárcega-Chetumal highway, near the town of Conhuas, one encounters the turn-off connecting to a dirt road that leads to one of the most important settlements in the central Maya area, known for the abundance of its architecture and inscribed monuments. Carrasco notes that the deterioration of the inscriptions has stood in the way

² *Proyectos especiales de arqueología*, Mexico City, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes/Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia/Fondo Nacional Arqueológico, 1993, pp. 10-11.

of the sort of epigraphic studies undertaken in Palenque, Yaxchilan, Tikal or Copan.

The site's main center was located on a dome of approximately 15 square miles surrounded by bays and seasonal streams. In the pre-Hispanic era the city had canals which provided water, as well as an adequate drainage system.

The city is characterized by the dispersal of the various groups of buildings, 13 of which are pyramidal. The monument area is located in the dome's main sector, "where they built both the two great pyramids which dominate the jungle (Structures I and II) and the palace complexes, in the fashion of great acropolises with their buildings constructed around patios and plazas."

Regarding the plan of the city, Carrasco points out: "The central area or plaza is made up of two sectors: one containing Buildings IV, V, VI and VIII, the other with Buildings II and V. Building II is the great pyramid, which dominates the group at the same time as it imparts a ceremonial or religious character to Building V, which divides the main plaza into two parts."

All the buildings in the main plaza have stelae or altars in front which must have contained the dynastic history of Calakmul's rulers. It is in this plaza that we find the largest number stelae in the site: more than 55 of the 120 reported up to this time.

Six hundred feet north of the Main Plaza is another important group of buildings. Among the most outstanding are Building XI or the Ball Court, as well as Building XII and Building XIII, which was evidently looted twice, seemingly in the 1970s.

Since Ramón Carrasco became the director of the Calakmul Biosphere Archeological Project, aimed at carrying out research at the Nadzcan and Balamku sites and creating a tourist attraction south of Campeche, work has nearly been completed on Buildings IV, V, VIII, XI and XIII.

In pre-Hispanic geography, Calakmul was part of central Petén, a region which also included the cities of Nakum, Tikal and Uaxactún; these settlements shared a common history. Today it is located in the extreme south of the state of Campeche, about 20 miles from the Guatemalan border.

The most important work during this time, explains Carrasco, has involved establishing the sequence in which the monuments were built. This is the first step towards determining the sites' archeological chronology.

Excavations have yielded ceramic materials, cooking pots, cylindrical vases, knives, polychrome and monochrome dishes, bone and stone remains, as well as objects made of shell, jade and obsidian. In the process several "dedicatory offerings" have also been found, which tells us that specific ceremonies accompanied construction or modification of the buildings.

These offerings consist of large platters, called *Aguilas Naranjas* (Orange Eagles); joined together in the form of an urn, they were used as depositories for seashells and pieces of jade. Two of these (containing five varieties of seashells, small amulets in the shape of human beings—carved of jade, shell and pyrite—as well as jade fragments) recreate the origin of the Maya world.

A royal tomb was found in building IV, with elements associated with both the Early and Late Classic periods. Of the nine skeletons found, eight were of women, two of whom appear to have been decapitated. Carrasco explains that in the Maya worldview, the purpose of placing a sacrificed body inside a building was to endow the building with a soul.

How much do 20th-century scholars know about Calakmul? Important settlements from Petén and Río Bec made commercial contact with this site, whose twin city is El Mirador. Both centers flourished at the same time as Teotihuacan (located in Mexico's high plateau).

Calakmul was a center of productive, religious and artisan activity. In its buildings, whose architecture is similar to that of the Petén region, "one observes the complete domination of massive structures over the clear spaces; the walls are of enormous dimensions

and the rooms extremely small, communication with the outside was through only one door; there are neither arcades nor isolated structural supports."³

It shares architectural characteristics with other Maya cities which also arose in the Petén region, such as Uaxactún, which seems to have been one of the oldest; Tikal, considered the largest; and Nakum, located in the Holmul valley, next to the river of the same name.

"According to Morley ('The Inscriptions of Petén,' Appendix VI), the oldest dates are written on Stelae 43, 28 and 29. The first of these is found at the great pyramid and the other two at Building V, which faces the pyramid...." Stele 43 is dated 514 A.D. and the other two 623 A.D., indicating that this is probably the oldest part of the city. In general, the stelae represent "personages standing over captives, with a scepter in the right hand, luxurious clothing, serpentine headdress, feet apart 180 degrees, the body facing out and the face in profile, inclined slightly forward, together with numerous glyphs."⁴

The objects found in the pyramidal structures reveal the integration of ritual and domestic activity. The exceptions are Building VI, an enormous platform probably used for public events, and Building VIII, dedicated to astronomical observations.

During the Early (250-600 A.D.) and Late (600-800 A.D.) Classic periods, Calakmul played an important role in the regional politics of Petén—even influencing the fall of one of Tikal's most important lineages. "But what the forms of this interaction were and how it was that the rulers decided regional policy are questions which have yet to be answered," Ramón Carrasco observes.

³ Ignacio Marquina, *Arquitectura prehispánica*, Mexico City, INAH, 1990 (facsimile of the first edition), p. 509.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 575-576.



Calak means "twin hills."

Towards new tourist routes

The location of the archaeological zone within the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve has contributed to the development of a program which integrates ecological conservation, archeological works and socioeconomic aspects of the region. This is one of the sites where restoration should go hand in hand with nature, not against it. The preservation of the area's flora and fauna is an integral part of the project.

People from nearby towns have participated in the archeological works and ecological conservation. Both activities provide a source of employment, making it less likely that local farmers will hunt or fell trees as means of subsistence.

The Biosphere Archaeological Project is planned to include not only Calakmul but also the Balamku and Nadzcan sites. In terms of tourism, the plan is to establish a route beginning at Conhuas, the only area town with lodging and services for visitors. The idea is that to prevent the deterioration of the environment in the archaeological zones, visitors will leave the area once the tour is over.

During such a visit tourists will find themselves joined together with nature. The tour—on foot, bicycle or riding a pack animal—allows Calakmul to continue to be what our ancestors desired: a human treasure in the midst of the jungle, which still reigns over the land, water and air of southeast Campeche. 