

Publication as Preservation at a Remote Maya Site in the Early Twentieth Century*

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IN THE LATE 1800s interest in the ancient Maya underwent the complicated transition from speculative musings to what modern scholars consider to be systematic archaeological inquiry. During this transformation, Maya archaeology was largely colonized, in a sense, by the American academic empire. Excavation was undertaken to further a structured concept of science and to solidify the idea of archaeology as an institutionalized discipline. The results of archaeological fieldwork on remote sites were not easily independently verified due to the constraints of the forbidding landscape and the vastness of this largely untapped resource. The known character of a particular scholar was considered to be a sufficient recommendation as to the quality of his textual archaeological record. This dependence on text resulted in a number of factual mistakes that have been repeated in publications and museum displays up to the present day. During this period in the development of the discipline, I assert that archaeological publication, not site stabilization, was regarded as a sufficient means by which a remote site could be effectively 'preserved'.

As a case study I will discuss early twentieth-century excavations within an Early Classic Maya mortuary structure at the site of Holmul, Guatemala. In this extreme case, a report started by Raymond Edwin Merwin, the only archaeologist who had worked at this remote Maya city, was 'completed' after his untimely death by another scholar, George C. Vaillant, who had never visited the site. Due to the perceived notability of Merwin's role in driving Maya archaeology into the realm of systematic science, Vaillant felt that the information he published was reliable and, indeed, required, as the

* I would like to thank the editors of this volume for bringing this diverse body of work together and providing helpful feedback. I would also like to thank the staff at the Peabody Museum and the Tozzer Library for allowing me to review Merwin and Tozzer's field notebooks.

inaccessible location of Holmul would effectively prevent archaeological work from being conducted there for nearly a century.

I

It is safe to say that antiquarian interest into the ancient Maya was comparatively late to bloom. To an extent, this was the curse (or perhaps gift) of geography. Before the end of the nineteenth century, the Spanish colonies, and then the nascent and unstable states of Central America, were at the edge of the world. Moreover, the massive archaeological sites of the Maya were located in the remote peripheral regions of these already peripheral territories. The relatively or actually remote locations of these sites allowed the scholars of the day to dismiss the lush Conquest-era descriptions of Mesoamerican culture as ‘highly embellished’, stating that ‘if buildings corresponding to such descriptions had ever existed . . . it is probable that some remains of them would still be visible’.¹ This complete rejection of the possibility of an advanced monumental culture within the Americas is strongly associated with contemporary ideas of racial hierarchy.

Following independence from Spain, Mesoamerica’s hidden archaeological treasures slowly drifted into Western public view. The continued presence of various European officials and increased US economic interest in Central America facilitated the stream of both Maya antiquities and accounts of ruins that trickled out of the region. This so-called ‘Age of Amateurs’² was dominated by a combination of ‘explorers and the armchair speculators’³ who did not engage in what modern scholars consider to be true archaeological inquiry.

Despite the production of a variety of volumes and reports of variable quality on the subject of Mesoamerican antiquities (e.g. Kingsborough, 1830–49;⁴ Dupaix, 1834;⁵ Wason, 1831;⁶ del Río 1822⁷), the Maya only truly entered the public consciousness with the publication of John Lloyd Stephens’s

¹ William Robertson, *History of the discovery and settlement of America* (New York, [1792] 1843).

² Robert L. Brunhouse, *In search of the Maya: the first archaeologists* (Albuquerque, NM, 1973), p. 195.

³ Gordon R. Willey and Jeremy A. Sabloff, *A history of American archaeology* (London, 1974), p. 28.

⁴ Edward King, Viscount Kingsborough, *Antiquities of Mexico* (9 vols., London, 1830–49).

⁵ Guillermo Dupaix, *Antiquités Mexicaines* (Paris, 1834).

⁶ Charles William Wason, ‘Antiquities of Mexico’, *The Monthly Review*, 1 (1831), pp. 235–74.

⁷ Antonio del Río, *Description of the ruins of an ancient city discovered near Palenque in the kingdom of Guatemala*, in *Spanish America* (London, 1822).

much read *Incidents of travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841) and *Incidents of travel in Yucatan* (1843). Supplemented by the masterful and striking illustrations of Frederick Catherwood, Stephens's lively accounts of jungle-covered ruins captivated readers of the period and have inspired nearly every Maya archaeologist since.

Through Stephens's account one can truly appreciate how remote the major Maya sites were to actions and functions of the mid-1800s. They existed on the very edge of space and time. Recounting his explorations around the Honduran site of Copán, Stephens wrote that

the ground was entirely new; there were no guide-books or guides; the whole was virgin soil. We could not see ten yards before us, and never knew what we should stumble upon next.⁸

The remains of the then-unnamed ancient Maya were the epitome of the mysterious unknown.

Stephens experienced a Copán that was completely different from the manicured UNESCO World Heritage site now visited by thousands of tourists each year. He literally could not see the massive stone structures that lay just before him. Stephens's Copán existed behind a seemingly impenetrable geographic barrier, the jungle barring both the curious from visiting and the scholarly from studying. Yet it was clear that Copán was interesting and valuable. Thus Stephens, desiring to present these ruins to the public, attempted to buy Copán with the hopes of dismantling the temples, floating the blocks down the river, and transporting the entire site to New York City where it could be reconstructed and enjoyed.⁹ This plan was unsuccessful, yet it is clear that Stephens felt it more feasible to transport this monumental site thousands of miles by sea, than for tourists to visit it in situ.

The very jungle that protects Maya sites from the outside world is also the root of a whole host of wild theories that allow the ruins to become unstuck in time. The dark and mysterious forest has the potential to hide even fantastic impossibilities. The jungle-covered ruin may transform, at least in the mind of the public, into a lost city that is still inhabited by an uncontacted civilization. In other words, in the jungle total preservation seems possible. 'Such beliefs die hard,' observed the British seminal late nineteenth-century explorer turned archaeologist Alfred P. Maudslay, 'indeed they lay such hold of the imagination that from time to time enterprising newspapers . . . favour us with

⁸ John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (New York, 1841), p. 119.

⁹ Victor Von Hagen, *Search for the Maya: the story of Stephens and Catherwood* (Farnborough, 1973), p. 150.

reports of Indian cities still inhabited and flourishing, hidden from the gaze of the vulgar by a wall of impenetrable forest.¹⁰

Following the publication of Stephens's accounts, speculation about the possibility of thriving monumental Maya cities filled with uncontacted people living 'by the old ways' began to be voiced. The forest that Stephens described was so impenetrable that the existence of a pyramid-filled Maya 'El Dorado' seemed reasonable. This theory so appealed to public consciousness that P. T. Barnum, always one to have his finger firmly upon the pulse of public interest, staged a stunt that involved two children he claimed were from an intact and functioning ancient Maya city. Despite referring to the children as 'Aztecs', those involved in the Barnum hoax called the fictional lost city 'Iximaya' and cited Stephens directly.¹¹

Atlantis, lost tribes of Israel, wayward ancient Egyptians, second comings of Christ, space aliens, and so on get tangled up with the Maya behind the veil of the jungle and, in many cases, these questionable claims existed long before archaeologists arrived on the scene. I believe that this concept of geographic impermeability has shaped both the practice of archaeology and conceptions of site preservation in the Maya region.

II

In the final decades of the nineteenth century and into the start of the twentieth (and perhaps, some would argue, up to the present), the Maya region was within the American archaeological empire and European archaeological interest lay elsewhere. This is not to say that absolutely no Europeans participated in early Maya archaeology, yet it is clear that the overwhelming majority of notable early Mayanists were either from the United States or were funded by American institutions. One need only compare the relative size of the British Museum's Latin American gallery (a small room and a staircase landing populated mostly by objects collected by Maudslay) to the expansive halls dedicated to Mesopotamia to determine the focus of British archaeology at that time. The same observation could be made in any major European museum.

Indeed, once the discipline moved out of the era of 'armchair speculators' and 'amateurs' and into Maya archaeology as a science, the notable few non-American early Mayanists were exceptional exceptions. Most of these Europeans were on the cusp of the major institutionalization and disciplinary professionalization effort that characterized Maya archaeology in the very

¹⁰ Anne C. Maudslay and Alfred P. Maudslay, *A glimpse at Guatemala, and some notes on the ancient monuments of Central America* (London, 1899; repr. Detroit, 1979), p. 253.

¹¹ Brunhouse, *In search of the Maya*, p. 109.

early twentieth century. Because of this they fall outside the now traditional divisions between professional archaeologists and non-professional enthusiasts. Alfred P. Maudslay, for example, was a Cambridge-educated ‘adventurer diplomat’ who, in the 1880s and 1890s, produced both some of the earliest photographic images of remote Maya sites as well as the stunning casts of Maya monuments that are housed at Cambridge, the British Museum, and Harvard. However, Maudslay never considered himself to be an archaeologist, and he was not formally trained as such. Rather, he referred to himself as a visitor and a traveller who had stumbled onto Mesoamerica after extended diplomatic stints and extensive travels elsewhere.¹² His work was spectacular, but it was early and limited.

Teobert Maler, who was active in Mesoamerican archaeology circles from the mid-1870s until his retirement in Yucatán in 1905, was technically an Austrian citizen when he arrived in Mexico to serve as a soldier with Emperor Maximilian. Yet he stayed on in Mexico after the emperor’s surrender and obtained Mexican citizenship. Maler was not trained as an archaeologist and had almost no ties to European scholarship or institutions. His work was published primarily through Harvard’s Peabody Museum, much of it posthumously, including a large batch in the 1930s. Indeed, the permit from the Guatemalan government that Maler used to conduct research in the Petén from 1901 until 1908 was actually granted to the Peabody, and the renewal of the same permit resulted in the American-led excavations at Holmul,¹³ the dig that is at the heart of this discussion.

Even within a younger generation of Maya archaeologists, who began work in the 1920s and 1930s, non-Americans were sparse and nearly always associated with American institutions. For example, the Danish Frans Blom came to Mesoamerica with no European archaeological training, received a degree from Harvard, and eventually headed the Department of Middle American Research at Tulane University in Louisiana.¹⁴ The notable mid-century British archaeologist J. Eric S. Thompson studied anthropology at Cambridge but was forced to teach himself about the Maya, as no one at Cambridge was conducting research in that area. On his own impetus, Thompson wrote to the famous American archaeologist Sylvanus G. Morley to beg him for a job in 1925.¹⁵

Thus, with a few notable exceptions, the first wave of Maya archaeologists consisted of Americans who were primarily associated with either Harvard, the Archaeological Institute of America, the Carnegie Institution, and so on.

¹²Ian Graham, *Alfred Maudslay and the Maya: a biography* (London, 2002).

¹³See Alfred M. Tozzer, preface in Raymond E. Merwin and George C. Vaillant, *The ruins of Holmul, Guatemala* (Cambridge, MA, 1932).

¹⁴See Robert L. Brunhouse, *Frans Blom: Maya explorer* (Albuquerque, NM, 1976).

¹⁵J. Eric S. Thompson, *Maya archaeologist* (Norman, OK, 1963), p. 5.

While individual Europeans did participate in early Maya work, they were not representative of European archaeological traditions.¹⁶ One could say that the USA staked a claim on the Maya and Europe didn't challenge it.

III

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the emergence of American archaeology as a largely self-defined venture, the theoretical foundations of which governed for decades exactly how remote Maya sites were approached, excavated, and interpreted. Although the American school of archaeology had roots in European classicism, from the late nineteenth century onwards American archaeology was built on the same theoretical tradition as cultural anthropology. Both the archaeology and cultural anthropology of the Americas were conceived of as seeking the same truths through slightly different methodologies. This difference between the American and European traditions is reflected in how archaeology is classified at an academic level today. In the United States, archaeology is usually housed within a larger anthropology department and is considered one of the four 'sub-fields' of anthropology. In the UK and much of Europe, archaeology exists as a stand-alone department and is conceived of as a distinct discipline.

To begin to understand why this is the case, it is important to note the conceptual difference between the early study of ancient America and the early study of ancient Europe and the Middle East. In a broad sense, the European archaeological tradition is inherently the archaeology of 'the self'. By excavating barrows in England or studying megalithic monuments in Denmark, Europeans were reconstructing what they saw as their own past and often pushing modern ideas of nationality and culture back almost indefinitely. Less direct but perhaps more important was the claiming of the ancient Greeks and Romans as the spiritual progenitors of European culture and society, and the close kinship felt to biblical civilizations. Europe, at least in the popular consciousness, was built upon an intellectual and social framework that was inherited from the classical and Middle Eastern civilizations. Old World archaeology was, then, a practice in constructing and reaffirming European identity and singularity. It was a quest for modernity's roots.

In contrast, the archaeology of the Americas was, by definition, the archaeology of 'the other'. The ancient civilizations of the Americas flourished entirely outside of Europe's perceived cultural evolution. Bluntly, the Greeks, Romans, and biblical cultures were 'us', and the ancient Maya and other American civilizations were 'them'. To its early practitioners, the archae-

¹⁶Willey and Sabloff, *A history of American archaeology*, p. 64.

ology of the Americas was not culturally autobiographical. Instead it was anthropological; American archaeology was clearly focused on understanding civilizations, however ancient, that were non-Western and culturally separate.

It is in this basic difference between Old World and New World archaeology that we see the motivations behind eighteenth- and nineteenth-century assertions of a European presence in the pre-Conquest New World. By ascribing North American earthworks to a white race of 'mound builders', Mesoamerican pyramids to travelling Egyptians, and just about everything to lost tribes of Israel, the ancient cultures of the Americas were Europeanized and recast as the archaeology of the self. Furthermore, living indigenous groups within the Americas were divorced from archaeological remains and dismissed as racially inferior latecomers.

Perhaps one of the most exceptional aspects of Stephens's travel accounts is that he presents a strong argument for the modern Maya to be the descendants of the civilization that built the sites that he recorded. Controversial in its day, the belief that the ancient civilizations of the Americas were untouched by Europe slowly became the dividing line between American archaeological reality and non-professional fantasy by the latter half of the nineteenth century. By that time American academic institutions were teaching archaeology as a component of an anthropology that was intimately linked to Native American ethnography. American archaeology was embraced as, and existed to be, the archaeology of the other.

By the turn of the century academic investigation into the cultures of the Americas had changed radically, having undergone a process of institutionalization. Now that American archaeology was linked with the nascent discipline of anthropology, its practitioners strove to refine both into a discipline for trained specialists, based on a methodology verging on 'science'. Museums and academic departments were founded. Professional societies sprung up and held meetings. Archaeological fieldwork was funded and students were trained.

This institutionalization of Maya archaeology was centred on the cycle of excavation and publication. In academized archaeology, diggers were required to be scholars and their theories required to be tested through regulated and semi-standardized excavation methods. These methods were passed on through on-site training. Students attached themselves to the field projects of trained archaeologists, both to learn proper techniques and to enter into the academic network of researchers who knew each other well and trusted the results of their perceived shared methodology. The very existence of this network allowed archaeologists to style themselves as scientists rather than adventurers or curiosity hunters.

The publication of excavation results continued the process of legitimization by pushing discussion about the Maya into the forum of the academy.

Outside of in-field training, publication became the primary means by which information about Maya sites was transmitted to other scholars and students. To that end, publications and the field notes behind them became the sole record of many remote sites.

IV

At the start of the twentieth century the archaeologists working in the Maya region were not immune to the preservational sensibilities that prevailed throughout the rest of the world. They were very interested in ideas of intact stabilization, and were duly horrified by the compromised nature of many of the sites they encountered. Destruction at the hands of curiosity hunters and the effects of local stone scavenging had been noted and lamented as early as the mid-1800s. By the twentieth century the less remote Maya sites such as Copán, Quiriguá, Uxmal, and Chichén Itzá were undergoing site stabilization and preservation sponsored by both foreign institutions and local governments. Even with improved access, the stabilization of these sites was difficult, largely due to the ever-present jungle. Sylvanus G. Morley recounted that the Archaeological Institute of America's first foray into the study and preservation of the Guatemalan site of Quiriguá in 1910 was almost entirely devoted to the removal of massive trees. These 'forest titans' not only threatened to smash standing monuments, but also 'were actually leaning towards them [the monuments]', meaning that cutting them down would have 'injured the nearby sculptures'.¹⁷ Morley recorded that it was only after the complete deforestation of the Quiriguá region and the reoccupation of the whole valley that the monuments were exposed enough to even reduce moss growth.

The relatively accessible sites at the edge of the Maya region circled a no-man's-land on the preservation map. Alfred Maudslay, writing in 1899, speculated that the rapid growth of vegetation at deep jungle sites would prevent potential visitors from getting a 'satisfactory view'. He recorded that a Mr W. H. Holms of the Field Columbian Museum of Chicago 'who visited the ruins [of Palenque] in 1895, only four years after I had cleared them, wrote to me to say that he had to use a plan and compass and cut his way from building to building, as a dense growth of over twenty feet in height completely obscured them from view'.¹⁸ Thus, in less than four years the jungle could completely reclaim a cleared site, meaning that even the most basic level of physical site preservation, such as preventing 20-foot trees from taking root on temples, would require a year-round presence. Far from even the smallest

¹⁷ Sylvanus G. Morley, *Guide book to the ruins of Quirigua* (Washington, DC, 1935), p. 10.

¹⁸ Maudslay and Maudslay, *A glimpse at Guatemala*, p. 259.

village, as many scholars noted, and far from a stable source of potable water, preservation of these remote jungle sites was simply not feasible at that time. Due to the logistical impossibility of deep jungle in-situ site stabilization, the turn-of-the-century Maya archaeologists felt that by publishing fieldwork reports they were doing everything within their power to preserve a site for the future.

In order to discuss the concept of textual records serving as a sole preservation tool, especially during a time when in-situ preservation elsewhere was at its zenith, it is important to remember how inaccessible many Maya sites truly are. The prevailing idea among the archaeologists of the early twentieth century, an idea that was not entirely incorrect, was that the remoteness of many Maya sites would prevent nearly everyone (researchers and certainly tourists) from ever visiting. Life in the Petén was often absolutely miserable, filled with constant rain, poisonous snakes, tropical diseases, and fearsome loneliness. For example, the archaeologist Edwin M. Shook contracted malaria and slipped into a coma at the deep jungle site of Uaxactún in the 1930s.¹⁹ The idea that these sites were prohibitively inhospitable to more casual visitors came from the archaeologists' own experiences.

Even if an archaeologist wished to stabilize a deep jungle site on anything other than the smallest of scales, there was little practical way to pull this off. Supplies, which were hauled in on mule-back, were restricted to the basic needs of the excavators: food and excavation equipment. Limited time and scant resources were thus used for what the archaeologists considered to be important scientific inquiry into the past. They rarely attempted to physically preserve structures that they felt that no one would ever see. Thus, on-site recording followed by publication was the only preservation tool available to the early archaeologists working at remote Maya sites. Archaeology was (and still is) considered to be a destructive but necessary process, and the proper dissemination of excavation reports is believed to mitigate this destruction. A published archaeological report became the 'site record' and, as such, was the official 'textual copy' of a site for other scholars to use, written in recognition of the impossibility of excavating the same material twice.

This site record became doubly important for very remote sites. The difficult terrain of the Maya region prevented independent verification of even the most basic information presented in archaeological texts, while the seemingly endless supply of newly discovered ruins focused excavation attention away from previously excavated remote sites. The reliability of a particular archaeological publication rested on the perceived believability of the original excavator. This is where the construction of an academic network comes in.

¹⁹Edwin M. Shook, *Incidents in the life of a Maya archaeologist as told to Winifred Veronda* (San Marino, 1998), p. 40.

People in the same academic network trusted the work of their colleagues, and character was a testament to research skill.

Information about difficult to reach yet important sites was required in order to 'preserve' said site, rendering it usable for academic comparative study in the future. However, if a researcher was unwilling or unable to complete and publish an excavation report, at times it was published for him, having been completed by others. In some cases, these others had not visited the site being discussed and the resulting publications thus are filled with assumptions and errors. But, as the completed publications represented preserved archaeological sites, they were both transmitted and believed.

V

In 1906 Raymond E. Merwin enrolled as a graduate student at Harvard. He had completed a bachelor's degree in 1903 and a master's degree in 1904 at the University of Kansas where he taught sociology and anthropology. From 1906 to 1908 he was a Hemenway Fellow at Harvard, and during this period he conducted archaeological excavations at the Madisonville Cemetery and the Turner Mounds in Ohio, and the Volk site in Delaware. Merwin was appointed Fellow in Central American Research at Harvard in 1908/09, and in 1909/10 he accompanied Alfred M. Tozzer on an exploratory trip to Guatemala and British Honduras. It was on this first trip that Merwin and Tozzer visited, among other sites, the ancient Maya city of Holmul.

Holmul is located on the eastern edge of Guatemala's Petén region, very near to the Belize border but quite far from modern settlement (see Figure 10.1). It is a massive, monumental urban area that seems to have been occupied during the entire span of the Classic Maya period as well as back into the Late Preclassic. Holmul, like most Maya lowland sites, experienced a population peak during the Terminal Classic and then fell into decline and abandonment by around AD 900. Tozzer and Merwin learned about the existence of Holmul from a map produced by Teobert Maler for the Peabody Museum in 1908: 'Maler had evidently heard of these new ruins but he had never seen them.'²⁰ The two archaeologists spent a few days on site, after which Merwin suggested that he would like to 'make careful investigation of Holmul'.²¹ Thus, in the 1910/11 field season, Merwin conducted intensive excavations at Holmul. These excavations have since been lauded as the first 'scientific' archaeological excavations to have been undertaken in the Maya region.

²⁰Tozzer, preface in Merwin and Vaillant, *The ruins of Holmul*.

²¹Ibid.



Figure 10.1: Map of Guatemala showing the locations of Holmul and other sites mentioned in the text. (By Donna Yates).

Merwin's field notebooks record that he spent much of the season conducting stratigraphic excavations within a structure that he called Building B of Group II.²² At first glance, Building B is not the most exciting structure at Holmul: on their initial visit to the site Tozzer and Merwin took only basic measurements of the mound and did not record any notable features.²³

²²Merwin's field notebooks as well as Tozzer's contemporary field notebooks are housed in the archives of the Peabody Museum under accession numbers 10-63, 11-16, 14-64, and 15-73.

²³Alfred M. Tozzer, *Field notebook 8, 1909/10, 'Siebal, Holmul'*, Peabody Museum, Accession Number 10-63, p. 41.

However, after a revisit to the mound produced favourable results, Merwin devoted himself to analysing the building and recording its features. He concluded that Building B was built, demolished, and rebuilt in multiple phases, the final phase being a large, pyramid-shaped superstructure that was constructed to completely cover all earlier temples and building works.²⁴ This Russian doll-type of building is quite common in Maya urban construction. Merwin completely removed this superstructure to find a well-preserved vaulted stone building that was decorated with painted stucco. Inside he found multiple rooms filled with around twenty interments. Digging downwards into previous incarnations of the building, Merwin found several other chambers with more human burials and corresponding grave goods.²⁵

As time and resources were limited, Merwin was forced to halt excavations before he felt that work at Building B was finished. At the end of his account of excavations, Merwin's own field notes implore the reader to 'see other notes as this [further features in Building B] will be examined later',²⁶ yet these other notes do not exist. Merwin was able to take the portable artefacts that he removed from Building B (i.e. human bones, pottery, and other grave goods) out of the jungle, out of Guatemala, and back to Harvard, where they remain. As for Building B itself, Merwin backfilled some of his artificial trenches but left the rooms and burial chambers that he excavated unfilled. The structure was left as an open and empty shell (see Figure 10.2).

After obtaining his Ph.D. in 1913, Merwin paid a very short visit to Holmul in February of 1914 and then never visited the site again.²⁷ By 1915 his health was deemed too poor to allow for further excursions into Central America. After a long decline, Merwin died in 1928, having never finished his official report of excavations at Holmul.²⁸

VI

Nearly two decades after the excavation of Holmul, Dr Raymond E. Merwin was dead and there was no published report of the site. This was an unacceptable situation to the archaeologists of the first half of the twentieth century, especially with regard to the Holmul excavations. First, at the time, the Maya

²⁴Raymond E. Merwin, *Field notebooks 1, 2 and 4, 1910/11*, Peabody Museum Accession Number 11-16; Raymond E. Merwin and George C. Vaillant, *The ruins of Holmul, Guatemala* (Cambridge, MA, 1932).

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Merwin, *notebook 2*, 1909/10.

²⁷Raymond E. Merwin, *Field notebook 5, 1913/14*, Peabody Museum, Accession Number 14-64, p. 2.

²⁸Tozzer, preface in Merwin and Vaillant, *The ruins of Holmul*.



Figure 10.2: Current state of one of Merwin's 1911 excavations. Like Building B, this excavation was left open and exposed, compromising the structure. (Photo by Alexandre Tokovinine).

late Preclassic and Early Classic were little understood and the Holmul Building B artefacts comprised the single largest collection from this time period. Vaillant considered the Holmul material to be ‘the finest collection of Maya ceramics ever assembled for a single site’.²⁹ Without proper documentation to accompany the objects from Building B, the artefacts were of little use as a comparative collection.

Second, during the first half of the twentieth century it seemed unlikely that anyone else would work at Holmul in the foreseeable future. The logistical difficulties involved in conducting scientific archaeological work at Holmul and other such sites were well known. According to Vaillant:

The unfavourable natural conditions, also, restricted research to temples and monuments, since the *almost impenetrable forests* concealed surface indications of the rubbish beds on which stratification depends.³⁰

Not only was the site remote, but by virtue of it having been investigated once Holmul was likely to be passed over in favour of the many recently discovered unexcavated sites. Indeed, archaeological excavations did not resume at Holmul until nearly ninety years after Merwin’s initial work.

Finally, by the time of his death, Merwin’s work at Holmul was being talked about in archaeological circles as the first real ‘scientific’ inquiry into the Maya. That is, the Maya archaeologists of the 1930s felt that ‘Merwin has the honour of having provided the first stratigraphical study of a Maya ruin’.³¹ Stratigraphy is held as the hallmark of archaeological modernity and thus the Holmul excavations were a significant milestone. Vaillant, seeking to ‘summarize the significance of Merwin’s work at Holmul’, wrote:

[Merwin] made one of the first scientific studies of a Maya site and built a foundation for field archaeology in the Peten region by architectural and ceramic stratification which he discovered. He showed the necessity for a material culture sequence in the Maya area since no dated monuments survived at Holmul. He collected one of the most historically and artistically significant bodies of material ever found in the Maya area. It is a pleasure to give honor where honor is due.³²

The excavation of Holmul, as a pivotal moment in the study of the ancient Maya, required commemoration and preservation. Several years after Merwin’s death, Tozzer and Vaillant felt that ‘the publication of this report could be delayed no longer’.³³

²⁹ Merwin and Vaillant, *The ruins of Holmul*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

³¹ Tozzer, preface in Merwin and Vaillant, *The ruins of Holmul*.

³² Merwin and Vaillant, *The ruins of Holmul*, p. 4.

³³ *Ibid.*

Having emerged as the practitioners of a newly institutionalized discipline, the Mayanists of the 1930s were concerned with their own professional history. To leave Holmul unpublished would be akin to striking a defining disciplinary moment from the record. Vaillant lamented that '[h]ad Dr. Merwin's discoveries been published at the time at which they were made, they would have been unique as developing the only stratigraphy hitherto encountered in the course of Maya archaeology', going on to say that 'the lustre of Dr Merwin's accomplishment ... still remains the first ceramic stratigraphy established in the Maya field'.³⁴

And thus Vaillant produced a Holmul excavation report complete with an explanatory introduction by Tozzer. Recall that Tozzer visited the site of Holmul for less than a week and did not participate in the excavation of the site. Vaillant completed a ceramic study of the Holmul collection at Harvard but never visited the site itself. The volume was published in 1932, four years after Merwin's death and twenty-one years after his excavations at Holmul. For the sake of transparency Vaillant placed his initials below paragraphs in the text that contained his own conclusions and Merwin's below conclusions that supposedly came from the late excavator's own writings. This method was repeated a year later by Jens Yde, who produced a similar but unpublished report of Merwin's excavations in Quintana Roo, Mexico, 'carrying [Merwin's] work through' because he had been unable to bring said work 'into a state which was fit for publication'.³⁵ Suffice to say, Merwin's initials do not appear very often in either of these texts.

The Holmul volume, billed as by 'Merwin and Vaillant', became an important reference work for the study of Early Classic architecture, ceramics, and burial practice. It allowed Harvard's Holmul collection to be used for contextualized comparative study and inspired a number of museum displays complete with models of Building B (Figure 10.3). One such model, along with oversized stratigraphic section drawings from the Merwin and Vaillant text, remains on display at Harvard's Peabody Museum. Thus, for both specialist study and for the public museum-style experience, this volume has become the preserved site of Holmul.

VII

In the summer of 2003 I revisited Building B at Holmul. My original plan was to clean inside the deeper burial chambers within the structure, in search of

³⁴Ibid., p. 1.

³⁵Jens Yde, 'Architectural remains along the coast of Quintana Roo; a report of the Peabody Museum expedition, 1913-14; compiled from the field notes of Raymond E. Merwin' (1933), unpublished report.

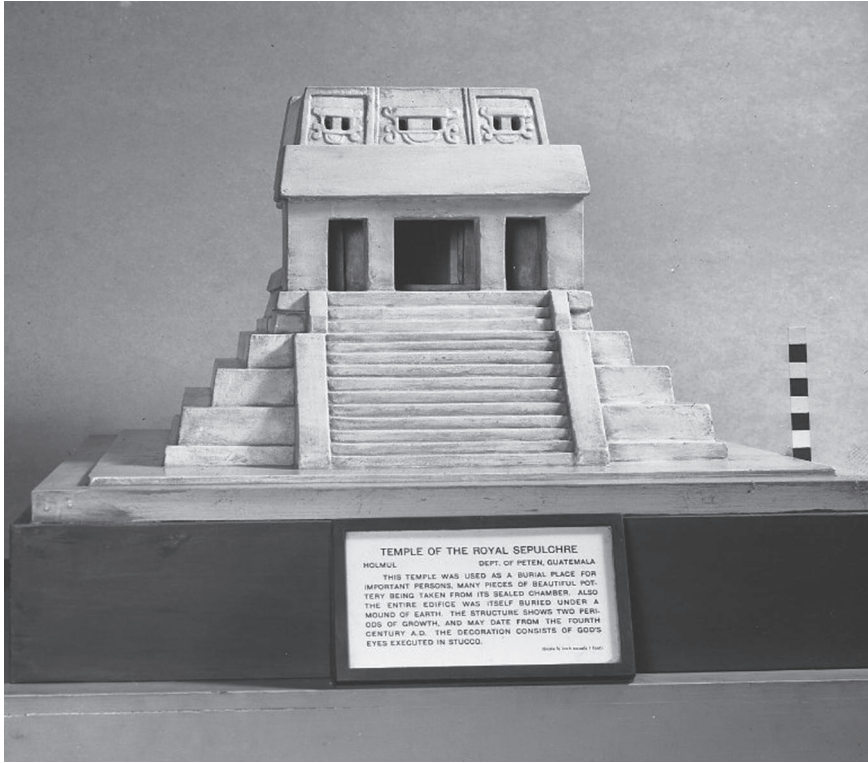


Figure 10.3: Model of a fancifully restored Building B, here referred to as the ‘Temple of the Royal Sepulchre’. This model, photographed in 1941 in the Brooklyn Museum, is one of several that present Building B based on its depiction in the Merwin and Vaillant text. (Photo from the collection of the Brooklyn Museum).

any human remains that Merwin may have neglected to collect. Sadly, Building B was in such a poor state that my work within the deeper chambers was likely to cause an internal collapse. Before the local workman performed a mime showing me being crushed to death, and advised me to get out, I was able to make an interesting observation inside the structure. The accepted section drawing of the building, the one on display at the Peabody Museum that is the supposed record of the first use of archaeological stratigraphy in the Maya region, was incorrect. I decided that a fresh inquiry into the architectural sequence at Building B was both warranted and feasible.

While cleaning the front room of the structure I discovered the remains of a rectangular-shaped archaeological trench that was not recorded in the Merwin and Vaillant publication. From this trench I recovered artefacts from Merwin’s work including two tin cans and a fragmentary shovel. At a depth of around 1.5 metres I encountered another intact Early Classic tomb, com-

plete with burial goods. It appeared as if Merwin detected the burial at the bottom of his trench, as two of the stone slabs that sealed the tomb were missing (see Figure 10.4). This tomb is located in precisely the spot recorded in Merwin's notebook as 'will be examined later'. My best guess is that Merwin made unrecorded cursory excavations, detected the tomb, and was unable to



Figure 10.4: Profile drawing of the published architectural sequence of Building B, which was adapted from a sketch in Merwin's notebook. A indicates where I detected one of Merwin's undocumented trenches. B marks layers of cut stones added by Vaillant that were not in Merwin's original sketch. C marks the location of the tomb that was discovered by Merwin in 1911 but was omitted from the 1932 text. D marks the location where Vaillant imagined Merwin searched for but did not find a tomb. (Adapted from Merwin and Vaillant, *The ruins of Holmul, Guatemala* (Cambridge, MA, 1932).

follow up on what he found. By not publishing his own notes, this tomb was lost and forgotten.

To make matters worse, Vaillant based his much-reproduced cross-section drawing of the temple (see Figure 10.5) on a very rough sketch from within Merwin's notebook,³⁶ not on a scaled and detailed architectural plan. Depending on how one interprets this sketch, Merwin's drawing may actually record the presence of the tomb that he found (and I refound) in a location that he wished to revisit at a later date. Yet Vaillant specifically notes that:

The construction of the front face masonry suggested one or more sealed burial vaults behind it but a rather hasty examination due to the limited time at our disposal, did not reveal such interior chambers.³⁷

It seems that, due to fragmentary field notes, the death of the excavator, and the passing of a decade, Vaillant translated a clearly intact burial chamber located below the *front room* of Building B into the failed possibility of a burial chamber behind the building's *front face masonry*. For this and other



Figure 10.5: The logistics of deep jungle archaeology contribute to preservational difficulties. The living conditions of the modern archaeologists working at Holmul seen here hint at what Merwin must have faced. (Photo by Alexandre Tokovinine).

³⁶ Merwin, *notebook 4*, 1910/11, drawing 1.

³⁷ Merwin and Vaillant, *The ruins of Holmul*.

reasons, conclusions drawn from the presentation of Building B in the Merwin and Vaillant text are likely to be flawed. Despite good intentions, Holmul was not completely preserved via text.

VIII

Archaeologists still imbue the texts that followed early work with an aura of moderate believability, despite examples such as Holmul. Why? Because these texts are what was preserved of the sites. To reject a 'scientific' archaeological text as preservational stand-in for an inaccessible site is to assert that archaeological professionalism, sound methodology, and extended off-site study of recovered materials do not produce a suitable record of the past.

Indeed archaeologists, faced with the inability to re-create any 'archaeological experiment', must routinely have faith in the professional recording methods of others. Seemingly to assure the professional reader that Merwin's death did not result in the loss of the preserved site, Tozzer wrote in his preface to the Holmul report:

Merwin and I travelled and lived for five months in the tropical bush. Such an association is perhaps the strongest test of character and forbearance. Merwin was an ideal companion in every way. His willingness and good temper were unflinching, his archaeological work was of a very high order, *his methods of record excellent*.³⁸

Tozzer personally vouched for Merwin's recording methods and assured the reader that what was presented in the volume should be believed.

Vaillant admits that 'Dr. Merwin was not spared to coordinate the text and to formulate his conclusions', and that the one time he met Merwin in person he 'could not ascertain what his final ideas were on the results of the excavations'. However, he assures the reader that 'Merwin left in the course of his work very full notes and had completed his plans and selected his drawings'.³⁹ The field notebooks and sketches in the Peabody Museum Archives do not support this claim. Specifically, no completed plans are among Merwin's field notes. While it is possible that Vaillant was working from material that is not housed in the Peabody Museum, his plans are nearly identical to the rough sketches present in Merwin's notebooks. Merwin does appear to have 'selected his drawings' but had not converted them into a polished, professional 'completed' form. It is not surprising that Vaillant overstated the completeness of Merwin's text as he was effectively arguing that archaeological

³⁸Tozzer, preface in Merwin and Vaillant, *The ruins of Holmul*, emphasis added.

³⁹Merwin and Vaillant, *The ruins of Holmul*, p. 4.

field notes could be used to reproduce an archaeological site for public consumption, even without the presence of the original excavator.

While playing down his own involvement, Vaillant asserted that his own personal commentaries within the text ‘were so obvious that [Merwin] would in all probability have reached the same conclusions’.⁴⁰ This statement is startling to say the least and challenges the very idea of Holmul as being accurately preserved via text. Even shortly after the Holmul report was published it was clear to interested scholars that ‘the volume itself is Vaillant’s’.⁴¹ Yet this fact was not considered particularly problematic as readers felt that ‘the archaeology is soundly presented and the record of the stratigraphy is very clear’.⁴² Vaillant’s own conclusions were said to ‘thoroughly cover the entire situation at Holmul’.⁴³

IX

If anything, Holmul is more remote today than it was in Merwin’s time. Tozzer refers to a place called Yalloch or Yaloch, an inhabited *chiclero* camp, being about a two hour and fifty minute ride from Holmul, presumably on mule-back.⁴⁴ Currently, the closest settlement to Holmul is the border town of Melchor de Mencos. The route from Melchor to the site consists of a several-hour truck ride that is significantly lengthened during the height of the rainy season (see Figure 10.5).

As for Building B, it is important to remember that Merwin stripped away both the jungle flora and the later Maya superstructures, exposing an older, more fragile building that had not seen the light of day for centuries. These protective layers are what preserved Building B’s delicate stucco decoration. Merwin made no attempt to protect and preserve this inner building and ninety years of exposure have taken their toll. The red paint that Merwin documented on parts of the building is now entirely gone and the stucco itself is badly damaged.

Several structural components of the building display large cracks that are not evident in Merwin’s photographs. Merwin’s notebooks record that a number of the rooms in Building B had been filled, floor to ceiling, by the Maya, and the structure has not fared well without that additional support. Several parts of the building may be near collapse.

⁴⁰ Merwin and Vaillant, *The ruins of Holmul*, p. 5.

⁴¹ Lawrence Roys, ‘Review of the ruins of Holmul, Guatemala’, *American Anthropologist*, 36 (1934), pp. 297–300.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Tozzer, *notebook 1*, 1909/10, p. 8.

Looting has taken the greatest toll on Holmul (see Figure 10.6). While some degree of illicit artefact hunting was noted at Maya sites as early as the mid-nineteenth century, it was in the 1960s that the collection of Maya antiquities became extremely popular, and by the 1980s the looting of the Petén sites was devastating.⁴⁵ Holmul appears to have been a particular target for US-financed illegal looting enterprises in the late 1980s and 1990s, partly because the site was too remote to be monitored by Guatemalan authorities but mostly because of the fame of Merwin's artefact collection.

Holmul has a reputation of producing museum-quality pieces, particularly pottery of a particular iconographic tradition, known as the Holmul Dancer style from a type pot found during Merwin's excavations. Looters' trenches and dynamite have damaged nearly every building at Holmul. In a certain sense, the very publication that was meant to preserve Holmul actually inspired its physical destruction. Ironically, Building B appears to have been left untouched by looters. This is most likely because Merwin's excavations left the building looking like an empty shell, already cleared of any marketable antiquities.



Figure 10.6: Modern looters' trenches into a jungle-covered structure at Holmul. (Photo by Alexandre Tokovinine).

⁴⁵See Clemency C. Coggins, 'Illicit traffic of pre-Columbian antiquities', *Art Journal*, 29 (1969), pp. 94–8; and Elizabeth Gilgen, 'Looting and the market for Maya objects', in Neil Brodie, Jennifer Doole, and Colin Renfrew, eds., *Illicit antiquities: the destruction of the world's archaeological heritage* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 73–88.

X

It is easy for archaeologists to deify early academic texts to some extent, even if we know their limitations. Perhaps it is because we like to imagine bits of ourselves in these adventurer academics who brazenly breached the jungle barrier, slinging their hammocks on ruined edifices while laying the foundations of the discipline that we love. I too went to work under the assumption that the sections and plans presented in Merwin and Vaillant would be more or less accurate and was surprised to find that they were not. Archaeologists want the information presented in older publications to be factual or else we have to deal with a situation where our disciplinary heroes are flawed and whole sites have been lost.

By no means do I wish to criticize the actions of past archaeologists; rather I hope that I have constructed a starting point for discussion of the idea of academic publication as a stand-in for the physical preservation of a site or monument in a remote location. And, indeed, text alone was not the sole preservational stand-in employed by the early Mayanists to combat a forbidding landscape. Outside of the purview of this chapter are the extensive plaster moulds of Maya architectural features that were carted out of the jungle on mule-back and into the major museums of the world, particularly at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁶ While casts and other physical reproductions have inspired much discussion within the academic study of preservation and heritage studies, the use of text itself as a replacement for a lost or distant site has not.

As an archaeologist trained in the American tradition, I find this academic focus on only physical preservation to be quite surprising. We archaeologists are taught that proper site recording, followed by the wide dissemination of the textual results of our work, is our sacred duty. Archaeological codes of ethics mandate timely publication. For example, the Archaeological Institute of America Code of Professional Standards holds that 'Archaeologists should make public the results of their research in a timely fashion';⁴⁷ the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Institute urges members to 'disseminate their findings to the scientific and scholarly community';⁴⁸ and the Society for American Archaeology Principles of Archaeological Ethics⁴⁹ says 'the knowledge archaeologists gain from investigation of the archaeological record must be presented in accessible form (through publication or other means)'.

⁴⁶ See Graham, *Alfred Maudslay and the Maya*, for a discussion of Maudslay's mould-making.

⁴⁷ Archaeological Institute of America, *Code of Professional Standards*, 1994.

⁴⁸ American Anthropological Institute, *Code of Ethics*, 1998.

⁴⁹ Society for American Archaeology, *Principles of Archaeological Ethics*, 1996.

Those archaeologists who develop a reputation for sitting on excavation reports are scorned. Archaeologists are taught that excavation itself is destruction. We destroy a preserved site by excavating it and we can never re-excavate what we have removed from the ground. Thus our written site records become—to the archaeologists and public who will never visit the actual location—the preserved site.

The first excavation at Holmul occurred at the time when the concept of obligatory publication hit archaeology. While Holmul may represent an extreme case of publication as a replacement for preservation, to the archaeologists of the day the production of the site report was a necessary evil meant to right a disciplinary wrong. The archaeologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries experienced a fresh ancient Maya. Unlike the classical and Near Eastern archaeologists of the day, the early Maya archaeologists had no back corpus of material to draw upon. Everything they saw was new and informative and they created a science to study it: a science that required supporting texts. These archaeologists did not foresee a future where tourists would easily visit jungle sites, and certainly could not predict that the structural integrity of previously excavated remote sites would ever provoke public concern. The archaeologists were genuinely trying to preserve the ancient Maya for posterity despite massive logistical barriers. Text as a stand-in for true physical preservation was the only available option.