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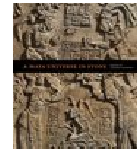
Stephen Houston, ed.

A Maya Universe in Stone



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From the 1940s until the 1990s, and especially in the 1960s and 1970s, all major and most minor archaeological sites from the Maya culture were plundered to meet the demands of the international art market. To name a few examples, Richard E. W. Adams recounts that starting in 1976 the deep jungle Maya city of Río Azul was targeted by an intense looting operation that eventually employed up to eighty diggers (*Río Azul: An Ancient Maya City*, 1999, 5). Von Euw and Graham recorded that in 1975, more than fifty looters trenches were dug at the site of Xultun, “representing the illicit activity of a number of men for many weeks in the removal of many tons of stone” (*The Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions*, vols. 5.1 (1979) and 5.2 (1984)). By 1983, when archaeologists visited the site of El Zotz to assess damage by looters, *all* of the buildings at the site of notable size or importance had been looted (see Laporte, *Trabajos no divulgados del Proyecto Nacional Tikal, Parte 4: Rescate en El Zotz, San José, Petén*, 2006). In 1971, at the Guatemalan site La Naya, Pedro Arturo Sierra, a Tikal park ranger working with archaeologist Ian Graham, was gunned down by looters at the site (*The Road to Ruins*, 2010, 350–35). In recent years, looting in the Maya region has slowed due to a combination of improved local protection and the fact that many sites have been looted to exhaustion. However, we continue to confront the consequences of these crimes of the past.

Among these consequences is a backlog of painfully unprovenienced Maya antiquities within museum and private collections outside of Central America. This lack of origin information proves a significant barrier to archaeological, art historical, and epigraphical research. Unlike provenance, which refers to an object’s ownership and sales, provenience reflects the object’s origin: the archaeological site the object came from and where in that site it was unearthed. Provenience is intimately tied to the archaeological concept of context and the physical relationships between artifacts that tell us everything we know about the past. Delicate but vital contextual information is lost in the looting process. Our understanding of Maya culture has been profoundly disturbed by the illicit trade in these antiquities, and we will never know what or how much information we have lost. The market for Maya antiquities has stolen this heritage and not offered much in return.

Compounding this upsetting loss of cultural information is the difficulty that the countries of the Maya region (Belize, Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador) and all antiquities source countries, face in effecting the return of antiquities in foreign collections. These antiquities were and are consumed in a manner that disrespects the laws of countries of origin and, in many situations, denies the sovereignty and dignity of Indigenous peoples. Numerous social and legal attempts to have looted and trafficked Maya antiquities returned to their countries of origin have failed due in large part to an insurmountable evidentiary burden.

As an academic based in a criminal law department (but with a PhD in archaeology and field experience excavating at Maya sites in Belize and Guatemala, as well as criminologically studying looting in the region), my research explores how policies meant to protect Maya antiquities fail. Courts in antiquities market countries have previously required countries of origin to produce unassailable evidence before ordering that an antiquity be returned, including:

1. that the antiquity originated in the country that is making the claim;
2. that the country had a valid and applicable law which clearly banned the export of the antiquity;
3. that the antiquity was still within the country of origin on the date that the law took effect; and
4. that the country of origin did not take too long to request the return of antiquity (i.e. a statute of limitations or prescriptive period expired)

Most unprovenanced and unprovenienced Maya antiquities fail some or all of these requirements. Take, for instance, the infamous November Collection of Maya pottery in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. These antiquities could have come from Guatemala, Mexico, or Belize; were most likely looted in the 1970s and 1980s although there is no known documentary proof of that; and at least in the case of Guatemala a formal return request was interrupted by civil war, potentially allowing the statute of limitations clock to run out (Yemma and Robinson, “Questionable Collection: MFA pre-Colombian Exhibit Faces Acquisition Queries," *Boston Globe*, April 12, 1997). Because these objects were stolen and because their origins were obscured, they cannot (yet) be recovered via the court. To put it simply, the crimes of looting and trafficking effectively shield market participants from being labeled criminals and from having antiquities seized and returned to countries of origin. For those wishing to see Maya antiquities returned, the situation has seemed hopeless. That is, until recently.

A Maya Universe in Stone, edited by Stephen Houston, is a welcome addition to a growing body of literature and practice which seeks to *reprovenience* looted and trafficked Maya antiquities. The book is focused on a pair of exquisitely sculpted Maya lintels which were made in the Usumacinta Region along the Mexico/Guatemala border and which date to between circa AD 769 and 783. The lintels depict courtly rituals being performed by local leaders in honor of Cheleew Chan K'inich of the Maya city of Yaxchilán, which is located on the riverine border between modern Guatemala and Mexico. The lintels are expertly and deeply rendered, showing people in elaborate finery interspersed with Maya text. The lintels are masterpieces of Maya sculpture and represent one of the only times a Maya artist signed their name to a work. These lintels were carved by Mayuy, and his name is a rare and precious link to the people behind such beautiful artistry.

Beyond being beautiful to look at, these lintels have a titillating modern history. They were discovered and then photographed in situ in 1950 by a self-styled "explorer," Dana Lamb, who dubbed the site "Laxtunich" but neglected to record where it was located or even what country it was in. Then, like every other Maya site in the region, Laxtunich was looted and the lintels ended up in international and, in some cases, unknown and inaccessible collections.

A Maya Universe in Stone presents a holistic approach to (re)discovering the location of Laxtunich. The authors of the book's four generously illustrated chapters combine evidence streams to attempt to recontextualize these "orphaned" lintels. First, the authors combed published works and archival documents for clues to Laxtunich's location. From this information, they mapped several possible hiking itineraries that Lamb may have followed, and compiled a list of geographic features that the "explorer" mentioned (a dry water hole here, a chicle gum collector camp) that would help identify Laxtunich on the ground. The authors' team then followed jungle paths to small Maya sites to assess how well they match descriptions of Laxtunich. To supplement the archival and field research, the authors next focus in on the sculptor, Mayuy, and his work. By analyzing how the figures and events on the Laxtunich lintels relate to other (looted) examples of sculptures by the same artists, the authors blend art historical research with political analysis, placing the creation of the lintels into a specific social environment. This work further confirms that Laxtunich should be found in the same small area on the Guatemala-Mexico border as archival and field research indicate.

Spoiler: the authors were not able to definitively locate Laxtunich, at least not yet, but they make a convincing case for a narrowing down of possibilities to a few smaller sites in the vicinity of Yaxchilán, seemingly on the Guatemala side of the border. The reader feels like it is only a matter of time until the site is found.

The chapters of this volume are primarily focused on the recovery of cultural information that can come from the reproveniencing of looted antiquities, and that information is entrancing. However, the described reproveniencing pathways, taken together with other pioneering work, form an exciting collection of possibilities for pursuing the return of Maya antiquities. These new possibilities could prove effective in court and beyond, though only if archaeologists and other experts collaborate and effectively communicate their results. To offer one example of a parallel reproveniencing effort, recent preliminary research conducted by Kirsty Escalante of Tulane University and her collaborators in the region of the Guatemalan Maya site of La Corona has shown that light detection and ranging (lidar), combined with field research, may be an effective way to document how patterns of looting changed over time at jungle covered Maya sites. This, paired with complementary research, may lead to an ability to match looted Maya antiquities to particular looting incidents in a particular location at a particular time, meeting the evidentiary requirements for return. It seems fitting that this work is being carried out near La Corona, a.k.a. Site Q, a site that, like Laxtunich, was once only known from unprovenienced looted antiquities that appeared on the market.

A combination of epigraphy, archival research, provenance and market research, legal research, site survey, lidar and satellite analysis, ethnographic and community research, and scientific analysis can show the most likely looting and trafficking scenario for an antiquity to the satisfaction of a court, representing a literal preponderance of the evidence. Excitingly, there is some indication that courts in key market jurisdictions are responding positively to this.

Amassing this body of evidence will require a lot of time-consuming and collaborative work, but as *A Maya Universe in Stone* demonstrates, such work will not only contribute greatly to our understanding of the ancient Maya, but may also result in the return of stolen Maya pieces to their rightful owners: the countries and communities of the Maya region.

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