

Maya Monument May Connect Little-Known Ruins With Mystery Site

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Forty years ago, the antiquities market in Europe and the United States was flooded with looted artifacts from the Petén rain forest of Guatemala. Their artistic style and inscriptions suggested to scholars that the monumental stones came from an abandoned seventh-century Maya city at some unidentified remote place, which became known as Site Q.



Yale University

Maya Mystery: Archaeologists reported finding a well-preserved limestone monument last week among the ruins of La Corona, in northwest Guatemala, which they believe may be linked to stones looted decades ago from an unidentified site.



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Now, archaeologists think the mystery has been solved in the little-known ruins of a place called La Corona. Last week they reported finding a well-preserved stone monument in two sections carved with more than 140 hieroglyphs that bear dates and tell stories of two kings mentioned prominently in the Site Q texts.

The discovery was made in April by Marcello A. Canuto, a Yale archaeologist who was exploring La Corona. The site is inside the Laguna del Tigre National Park in northwestern Guatemala, less than 20 miles from the temple ruins of Waka, called El Perú today by local people.

An analysis of the inscriptions was conducted by Stanley Guenter, a graduate student and specialist in Mayan writing at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. He noted the similarities between the style, chronology and texts of the La Corona monument and those of the looted material.

"This discovery concludes one of the longest and widest hunts for a Maya city in the history of the discipline," Dr. Canuto said in an announcement of a recent lecture at Yale in which he described the findings.

Dr. David Freidel, a Maya archaeologist at S.M.U. who is a leader of the nearby Waka excavations, supported the interpretation in an interview. "This is substantial evidence that this is Site Q," he said, adding with admiration, "Marcello was touched by the gods."

The discovery was not entirely surprising. In 1997, Ian Graham, an expert in Mayan hieroglyphs at Harvard, and a colleague, David Stuart, visited La Corona and came upon stones that made them suspect this was the long-sought Site Q.

Dr. Graham said in an interview that Dr. Stuart had read one of the inscriptions, which mentioned the name of a king who also figured in Site Q texts, and "was pretty much certain" that La Corona was the source of the looted material. An analysis of the stones suggested that they came from the same quarry as the Site Q artifacts.

Dr. Graham, who was not involved in the new research, called it an exciting discovery and "gratifying confirmation" of their earlier findings, though he conceded that at the time he had some reservations because of the site's modest size. Its crumbling ruins cover about two-thirds of a mile square.

Dr. Stuart, now an archaeology professor at the University of Texas, noted that at an international conference in 2001 he presented evidence that he said already established the Site Q-La Corona connection.

Dr. Canuto cautioned that further research might prove that Site Q - shorthand for the Spanish "qué," meaning "which?" - was not a single place. Perhaps the looted material will be traced to several sources with related histories and traditions.

Archaeologists deplore the practice of plundering ancient ruins, particularly widespread in poorly policed jungles, because they cannot tell exactly where looted artifacts came from, the all-important context.

Even so, Dr. Canuto said the newfound limestone monument was the same type of fine-grained stone used in the looted artwork. This, he said, "goes a long way to allowing us to demonstrate that many, if not most, Site Q monuments were looted from La Corona."

Archaeologists said that more intensive excavations there were likely to uncover other information to establish this as Site Q. A prize would be to find evidence that the two kings mentioned in the inscriptions, Chak Naahb' Kaan and his son, K'inich Yook, actually lived and ruled in this city in the last half of the seventh century.

Mr. Guenter said the panel's hieroglyphs gave a date, the equivalent of Oct. 25, 677, for the dedication of a shrine temple in which the monument was found. The temple was dedicated to a god named K'uhul Winik Ub'.