

Paper presented at the conference From Plunder to Preservation: Britain and the 'Heritage' of Empire, c. 1820–1940. Cambridge Victorian Studies Group, Cambridge. 21–22 March 2009.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will focus on the place that the excavation and publication of Maya sites had to the archaeologists of the early twentieth century: a time period when archaeological publication, not site stabilization, was seen as a sufficient means by which a remote site could be 'preserved'. Excavation was undertaken to further the structured concept of science and to further the idea of archaeology as an institutionalized discipline. Archaeological 'experiments', which were not easily verified due to the constraints of forbidding landscape and the vastness of the resource that lay largely untapped, went unconfirmed. The known character of a particular scholar was a sufficient recommendation to the quality of his archaeological conclusions. This resulted in a number of factual mistakes that have been repeated in publications and museum displays up to the present day. As a case study I will discuss my excavations at an early Classic Maya temple and mortuary structure at the site of Holmul, Guatemala. I will also comment on how the archaeological practices of the early 20th century have contributed to the current compromised character of this large and remote site.

MESOAMERICA AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Before the very late 19th century, inquiry into the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica was limited to the adventure tourists: out for adventure and intrigue who produced non-academic accounts of the wonders they encountered. Chief among this set was the four volumes produced by John Lloyd Stephens and the illustrator Frederick Catherwood in the early 1840s. Credited with introducing the ancient Maya to the outside world, their lively accounts of jungle covered ruins and breathtaking illustrations captivated readers of the period and probably inspired nearly every Maya archaeologist since. Although the authors were intrigued by the Maya ruins, their inquiry was limited.

For how well the Stephens and Catherwood books were received, very little else was produced about the Maya until the 1880s and 1890s. With a few notable exceptions, the first wave of Central American archaeologists were Americans and nearly all of them were associated with Harvard University. Inquiry into the cultures of the Americas had changed radically, having undergone a process of institutionalization. The discipline of Archaeology in the USA was created and refined. Indeed Harvard took the center stage in this process, creating The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in 1866 from which most early Mesoamerican work would emanate.

This institutionalization, this academization was centered on the processes of excavation and publication. Moving away from random digging, theories were now tested through regulated means and thus the diggers became researchers. They were scientists not adventurers or curiosity hunters. Also excavation allowed for on site training: students could learn proper technique and thus an academic network was created of researchers who knew each other well and trusted the results of their perceived shared methodology.

Publication of excavation results continued the process of legitimization by pushing discussion into the realm of the scientific institution. Outside of in the field training, publication was the primary means by which information about Mesoamerican sites was transmitted to other scholars and students. Publications and field notes were the sole records of remote sites and, essentially, were thought to be the only information anyone was ever going to get. They were the 'preserved' archaeological site.

And in making this assertion it is important to remember that Mesoamerican archaeological sites, especially those of the Maya Civilization, are extremely inaccessible. They were and are deep jungle sites located days from any modern habitation. The prevailing idea (which was not entirely incorrect) was that the remoteness of the sites would prevent nearly everyone (researchers and certainly tourists) from ever visiting the sites. And even if there was a desire for preservation or stabilization of these jungle sites, there was little practical way to do this. All supplies were brought in on mule back and were centered on the basic needs of the excavator: food and excavation equipment. The limited time and resources were used, understandably, for what the excavators considered to be important scientific inquiry into the past, not the preservation of structures that no one else was ever going to see anyway.

This emphasis on publication as the record of a remote site has, of course, resulted in difficult situations within the published corpus of Maya archaeology. Independent verification was prevented by difficult terrain as well as a desire to work at the ample "new" archaeological sites that were being found all over the Maya region. People in this same academic network simply trusted the work of their colleagues, character apparently being a testament to research skill. As information about difficult to reach and important sites was required, if a researcher was unwilling or unable to complete his excavation report and publish it, at times it was published for him: completed by others. This, as can be imagined, led to publications filled with assumptions and errors, but as they served the purpose of a preserved archaeological site, they were believed and transmitted.

MERWIN AND HOLMUL: A CASE STUDY

Raymond Edwin Merwin enrolled as a graduate student at Harvard's anthropology department starting in 1906. In 1909 Merwin accompanied Alfred Tozzer on an "expedition" to Guatemala and Belize, the first of 6 visits that he would undertake before his health intervened. It was on this first trip that Merwin and Tozzer discovered, among other sites, the city of Holmul.

Holmul is located in eastern part of Guatemala's Petén region, very near to the Belize border but quite far from settlement. Holmul was a massive monumental city which 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 rapid decline and abandonment.

In the 1911–1912 season Merwin conducted intensive excavations at Holmul. These excavations have since been lauded as the first "scientific" excavations to have been carried out in the Maya region.

Merwin named the building on which he conducted this stratigraphic analysis Building B of Group II. At first glance, Building B is not the most exciting structure at Holmul by far. However, after a cursory examination of Building B produced

favorable results, Merwin decided to devote the majority of the field season to this structure.

I will spare you the gory excavation details but suffice to say, Building B turned out to be a structure built, demolished and re built in multiple phases, the final phase being a large pyramid shaped superstructure that was constructed to completely cover all earlier temples and building works. Merwin removed this superstructure to find a vaulted stone building decorated with painted stucco and filled with around 20 interments in multiple rooms. He tunneled downward into previous incarnations of the building and found more burials. Time and resources were limited, and Merwin was forced to stop excavating before he felt that work at Building B was finished. Merwin was able to take the portable objects (human bones, grave goods) that he found in Building B back to Harvard where they remain, but the building itself was left as an open shell.

After obtaining his PhD in 1913, Merwin paid a very short visit to Holmul in 1914 and then never visited the site again. By 1915 his health was deemed to poor to allow for more excursions into Central America. Merwin died in 1928 having never finished his report on Holmul.

Thus, nearly two decades after the excavation of Holmul, Merwin was dead and there was no published report of the site. This was an unacceptable situation within the world of early Maya archaeology, especially with regards to the Holmul excavations for a number of reasons. First the Late Pre Classic and Early Classic periods of the Maya were little understood and the Holmul collection was probably the largest single corpus of objects from this time period. Without proper documentation to accompany the objects from Building B, they were of little use as a comparative collection. Also, it was unlikely anyone would work there again any time soon (and indeed archaeological excavations were restarted at Holmul a full 80 years after Merwin's initial excavations).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Merwin's work at Holmul is lauded as the first real scientific inquiry into the Maya. By this, the Maya archaeologists of the 30s meant that Merwin was possibly the first to document a Maya structure stratigraphically. Stratigraphy was held as the hallmark of archaeological modernity and thus Holmul was a milestone. Indeed, George C. Vaillant, the archaeologist ultimately charged with writing the final Holmul report, lamented that "Had 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."

And thus a report was produced by Vaillant with Tozzer writing the introduction. Tozzer visited the site of Holmul for one day, the day it was discovered. Vaillant had never been to Holmul. Vaillant put his initials below paragraphs that were his own conclusions and Merwin's below conclusions that originated with the now dead excavator. There are few Merwin initials.

Ultimately volume about Holmul was produced in 1932, 4 years after Merwin's death and 21 years after the excavations of Holmul. It became an important reference to Early Classic architecture and burial practice and allowed Harvard's Holmul collection to be used for comparative study. It also inspired a museum display that is still a prominent part of the Peabody museum. This volume became the preserved Holmul for all intents and purposes.

In 2003 I took part in excavations at Holmul. While the project's true goal was to investigate parts of the site that Merwin probably didn't know about, my goal was to revisit Merwin's excavations at Building B. I originally intended to clean up

the deeper burial chambers of the building in a search of human bones that Merwin may have neglected to collect.

The building was in a poor state and we determined that if I messed around too much in the deeper pyramid cavities, I was probably going to be crushed so the bone project was scrapped. However, after working in the building I realized the accepted section of the building, supposedly the first real use of archaeological stratigraphy in the Maya region, was wrong. A reanalysis of this building sequence was both warranted and less likely to kill me so I got to work.

Beyond the visual mismatch of the section drawing and the building I saw before me, it became clear that Merwin conducted excavations that Vaillant did not fully understand from the notes provided. Merwin left hints about these excavations in his notes and Vaillant did his uninformed best, filling in a portion of the pyramid with what he thought might be there and leaving out any indication of excavation. In cleaning the inside front room of the temple I discovered the remains of a back filled archaeological trench that does not appear in the publication. During the re-excavation process I encountered artifacts of Merwin's work: two rusted tin cans, a shovel head corroded to pieces. At a depth of about 5.5 feet I encountered a change of soil. To make a long story short, here was another Early Classic tomb, complete with burial goods. The tomb was sealed with rock slabs, two of which appeared to have been removed by Merwin. Presumably this was one of his last pits; he dug deep, found indications of a tomb, and filled the hole back intending to visit it on a later date.

In the sidewalls of this 80 year old trench I was able to see a number of plaster floors: stages of the building that Vaillant does not account for, meaning that any conclusions drawn about early Maya architecture from the Holmul report are flawed. Merwin may have conducted the first proper stratigraphic analysis of a Maya building but this died with him.

Ultimately we archaeologists still imbue this early work with an aura of believability, despite cases like Holmul. Why? Because it is what was preserved of the sites, it is what we have and we think we need it.

EPILOGUE: HOLMUL 80 YEARS LATER

If anything, Holmul is more remote today than it was in Merwin's time. Vaillant refers to Yalloch, a chicle camp, being about 2 hours and 45 minutes ride from Holmul. These days, the closest settlement to Holmul is the border town of Mechor de Menchos: a 4 hour truck ride that shifts to a multi day walk during the height of the rainy season.

As previously mentioned, Merwin stripped away both jungle cover and later Maya superstructures from Building B. Essentially these two protective layers are what preserved Building B's stucco decorated inner building. As no attempt was made by Merwin to protect or preserve this inner building, 80 years of heavy rains have taken their toll. The red paint that remained on parts of the building is now entirely gone and the stucco is badly damaged. In 2000 a palm palapa was built over the building to try and keep some water off but really the damage is done. Indeed the tomb that I located may have been partially damaged by water running in only over the past 80 years. Several areas in the building are near collapse if they have not already collapsed since I was there.

One preservational threat that Merwin did not foresee but has taken the greatest toll on Holmul is looting. By the 1970s collecting of Maya artifacts became extremely popular and by the 1980s the looting of the Petén region was endemic. In

one particularly case an offshore company was created by certain investors to systematically loot specific sites in Guatemala to produce a first rate collection for sale. For the record, this collection was purchased by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, over much public and academic protest. This is tremendously illegal.

Holmul appears to have been a particular target of this looting enterprise first because no one was monitoring the site but mostly because of the fame of Merwin's collection. Holmul had a reputation of producing museum worthy pieces and a particular Maya pot style, known as the Holmul Dancer style from the type pot found by Merwin, is particularly popular. Nearly every building at Holmul has been partially blown up with dynamite. Ironically Building B was not affected by this looting most likely because Merwin left it looking like a hollow shell: to a looter it looked like the place had already been cleaned out.

CONCLUSION

By presenting you with this case study I by no means wish to criticize the actions of the past. Rather I hope I have presented you with a starting off point for discussion of the concept of academic publication as a stand in for physical preservation of a site or monument. And indeed other stand-ins were used by these researchers including the extensive plaster casts produced of Maya monuments because the originals were too heavy for transport through the jungle

While Holmul may be an extreme case of publication as a replacement for preservation, it is not unique. The early Maya archaeologists were on a mission of discovery. They did not foresee a situation where people would easily visit sites like Tikal (which is Guatemala's biggest tourist moneymaker). In their time, a proper archaeological report about the site would be all that anyone could expect or want.

The archaeologists of the early late 19th and early 20th century experienced a fresh Ancient Maya, free from prior interpretation and destruction from looting. Unlike the Classical and Near Eastern Archaeologists of the day, the early Maya archaeologist had no back corpus of material to draw upon. Everything they saw was new and informative and they cannot be blamed for spending more time on discovery than actual on site preservation.

It is easy for archaeologists of today to deify these early archaeological accounts to some extent even if we know their limitations. It seems silly but the validity of some of these accounts are often not disputed since they are what we have. I myself went to work under the assumption that the Vaillant volume was correct and 6 years after this dig, the flawed models are still on display. We want these older publications to be true or else we have to deal with a situation where information has been lost and that is messy and depressing.