

Echoes of a Lost Colony

Long after the Teotihuacán empire faded from central Mexico, the Maya kept up some of its ways

by Nicholas M. Hellmuth

The construction of Guatemala City has nearly swallowed up the ruins of a regional highland Maya capital called Kaminaljuyu, which flourished from about 2,300 to 1,400 years ago. Based on archeological excavations of its building mounds and tombs, scholars have for years seen Kaminaljuyu as a major entry point in Maya territory for cultural influ-

ence from the roughly contemporaneous Mexican city of Teotihuacán, more than 2,000 miles away by trail. They have debated whether Kaminaljuyu represented a subject city or a place of contact for long-distance delegations of merchants and emissaries. Teotihuacan massive pyramidal temple platforms still testify to their builders imperial might. But why

would Kaminaljuyu, more than other Maya cities, have been the object of these foreigners attention?

Many have emphasized Kaminaljuyu's proximity to major deposits of obsidian (volcanic glass), the primary domestic tool in a pre-iron era. This traditional answer, I believe, needs to be amended: Kaminaljuyu was also the major Maya city closest to some important Teotihuacán outposts in non-Maya territory. While the imperial city itself lay far to the northwest, the outposts were spread just to the south of Kaminaljuyu, along the steaming coastal plain bordering the Pacific Ocean. Here, during the 1970s, in the region around the town of Tiquisate, bulldozers leveling an

This is the ninth article in a series that explores recent findings and interpretations concerning the rise and fall of ancient Maya civilization.

cient mounds to create flat fields for farm ing uncovered many graves and caches. In so doing they unearthed more whole, decorated Teotihuacán-style pottery than has been found in an entire century of excavations at Teotihuacán itself.

The finds included several hundred censers with elaborate lids, used to burn sweet-smelling native incense, the sap from copal trees; more than 500 slab legged, cylindrical tripod vessels decorated with incised or impressed designs and mold-made figures of gods and warriors. Fired clay molds suggest that these objects were mass-produced based on Teotihuacán prototypes, but the designs have a distinct local style. I was in Guatemala during those years researching Teotihuacán influence on the Maya and was alerted to these discoveries by personnel at the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología. Nevertheless, this spectacular collection remains little known even twenty years later

Trade was apparently the main reason



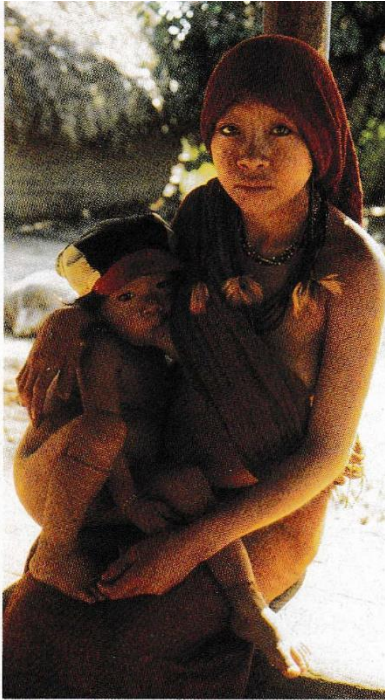
A maya figure from Copan holds a sacrificial knife. The symbolic decorations on this headdress are central Mexican in origin.

NICHOLAS HELLMUTH
FLAAR. Courtesy of the
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COVER: Some fungi-like the common woodland species *Mycena leai* are predators. Story on page 46. Photograph by Ray Coleman; Photo Researchers, Inc



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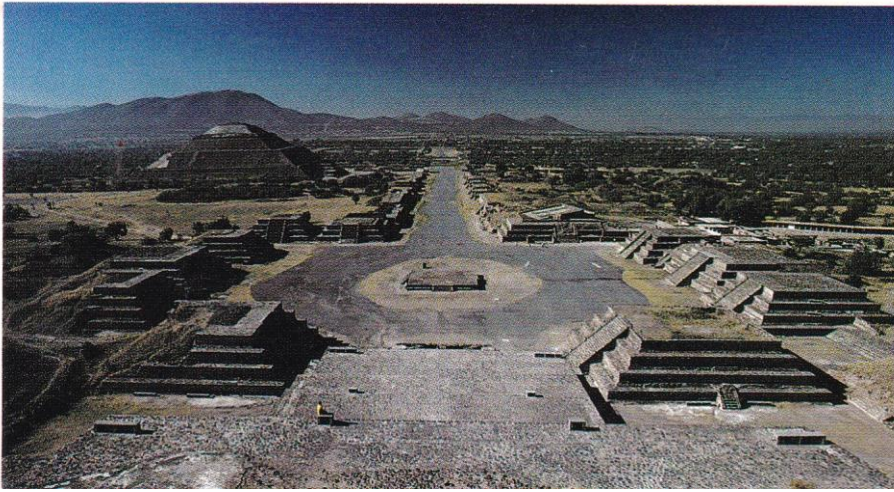
The Maya also adopted step and stepped-fret decorative motifs, two designs popular at Teotihuacán. The tablero with repeated step motifs typifies Teotihuacán architecture, while the stepped-fret motif especially characterizes El Tajin, a city near the gulf coast in the Mexican state of Veracruz. Some scholars believe that Oaxaca, the region inhabited by the Zapotec, was the ultimate source of both motifs, but whether or not this is true, they appear to have spread to the Maya through Teotihuacán influence.

Archeologists have not excavated any of the ancient architecture that lies buried beneath the numerous mounds in the Tiquisate area, most of which is probably poorly preserved adobe construction. Local bulldozer and tractor drivers, however, have plowed up several depictions of temples impressed in relief on mold-made pottery. These temple depictions, one on a clay pot and two on the fourteen-inch-high lids of censers, show the decorated top panels of building walls. Since such panels were high up, they were apt to be destroyed when buildings disintegrated. But the pottery depictions of the temples can be translated into realistic perspective drawings, allowing reconstruction of the architectural details. While most archeologists are not trained to render perspective, nowadays user-friendly computer software developed for architects (Auto CAD) will do this automatically for anyone who can join two points together with a straight line. The new, powerful battery operated computers can do such drawing right at Maya sites.

For example, on one of the incense burner lids, the complete figure of a warrior sits within a Teotihuacan-style temple facade. The piece is so burdened with decoration that it takes some doing to distinguish what is the building and what is the warrior. Once this is done, however



A copan ruler wears the ringed eyes of Tlaloc, a rain-fertility and war god. Nicholas M. Hellmuth, FLAAR, courtesy of the Instituto Hondureno de Antropologia y Historia.



Melinda Berge; Bruce Coleman, Inc.

archeologists and art historians can recreate the appearance of the temple.

Did the imperial city of Teotihuacán actually impose its rule on, or coerce allegiance from, Kaminaljuyu and other Maya sites, or did Maya cities voluntarily emulate Teotihuacán ways, perhaps at the behest of chiefly families that profited from the relationship? No one has ever suggested that Mesoamerican religions

won converts by friendly persuasion. And the constant brandishing of weapons demonstrates that Teotihuacán won friends and influenced people through power politics and sheer clout. But not a single battle scene shows Teotihuacáños strong-arming the Maya. No Teotihuacán character stands atop cowering Maya captives, no Teotihuacán warrior runs a Maya enemy through with a spear.

What we find instead are depictions of Maya who have adapted Teotihuacán trappings for their own conquest warfare. As described by Linda Schele ("The Owl, Shield, and Flint Blade," *Natural History*, November 1991), this symbolism appeared in connection with specific battles in about r.o.400, as Maya rulers sought to consolidate their power in the Tikal, Uaxactún, and Yaxhá regions.

The effect of the fall of Teotihuacán, in about A.D. 750, provides another indication that Mexican culture was emulated by, rather than imposed upon, the Maya. For unknown reasons, central Teotihuacán authority was destroyed in a relatively sudden manner, although the city itself apparently lasted some additional generations. If Teotihuacán had forcibly controlled Maya sites, we might expect some evidence of a casting off of alien symbols and ways. But instead we see that the Maya were content to maintain the customs they had incorporated.

Indications are that by A.D. 600, the beginning of the late Classic period, the Maya had made the Mexican elements their own, and direct influence from Teotihuacán had already faded. The most evident features of continued Teotihuacán culture in Maya areas are the talud-

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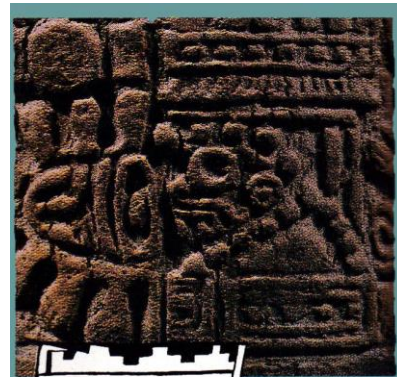
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tablero architecture and the depictions of Tlaloc-like deities, the latter often associated with a trapezoidal interlaced head dress called a year sign. The connection of these elements with militarism seems to account in large part for their perpetuation. The Maya kings continued to be portrayed in association with the symbols of Teotihuacán-style warfare, including Tlaloc-like face or just the ringed eye

A typical example of Teotihuacán elements surviving among the late classic Maya (A.D. 600 to 900) comes from Itzan, an important site in northern Guatemala currently under excavation by Kevin Johnston of Yale University and his Guatemalan colleagues. Although Itzan is thoroughly Maya, one of its several dozen stone stelae pictures its Maya ruler parad



A detail of pottery found near Tiquisate (photograph and middle drawing) depicts the deity Tlaloc within a temple. Using these architectural clues, artists have reconstructed the temple's design (bottom).

Nicholas Hellmuth; courtesy of the Museo Popol Vuh Universidad Francisco Marroquín. Drawings by Greg Cestaro and Wendy Giddens.

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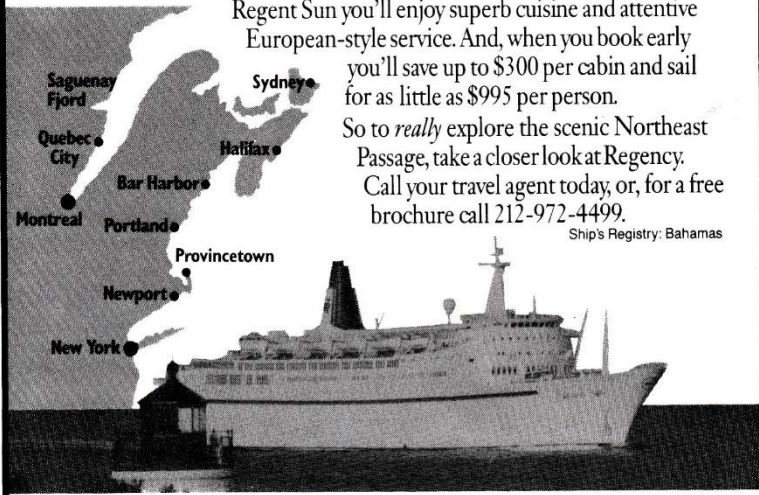
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