

Exciting New Discoveries at San Bartolo

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Editor's Note: The last issue of glyph notes included a "clip" and some tidbits about the San Bartolo symposium. This is a fuller, but not complete, report. It's a little longer than normal, but the importance of this symposium prompts us to publish much of the material that was presented. First is the report, followed by the authors' insights of points important for believers of The Book of Mormon.

The Symposium

Early in 2001, archaeologist William Saturno discovered a spectacular series of early Maya murals in an unexcavated pyramid at the San Bartolo ruins in northeast Guatemala. These ancient murals, dating to around 100 BC, include the earliest Maya hieroglyphs, and portray the most elaborate depiction of the Maya's creation myth ever discovered. Painted in brilliant polychrome, these remarkably preserved murals provide a unique corpus of iconographic and epigraphic information about the Maya. The paintings have been compared to Michaelangelo's paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

On October 30, 2004, at Irvine, California, the New World Archaeology Council held a symposium that featured for the first time the entire San Bartolo field research team, presenting their latest findings and interpretations of the his-

toric murals, including results from the 2004 excavation season which had not yet been published or presented to the general public.

Guest speakers included William Saturno with the University of New Hampshire who described how the murals were discovered and the joint efforts of the team working to preserve, conserve, and record the murals; Heather Hurst, Yale University and a recent recipient of the prestigious MacArthur "genius" fellowship, compared the Bonampak murals with those at San Bartolo; David Stuart, now with the University of Texas at Austin, talked about the relation of the hieroglyphic text that accompanies the murals and the origins and development of Maya writing; Karl Taube, University of California-Riverside, delved into the meaning of the iconography; the

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pre-eminent archaeologist Michael Coe, Yale University emeritus, discussed the dawn of Maya civilization; and John Clark, from Brigham Young University, spoke about the Olmec, or mother culture, and its relation to the Maya.

The day-long program was not only informative but also intellectually stimulating.

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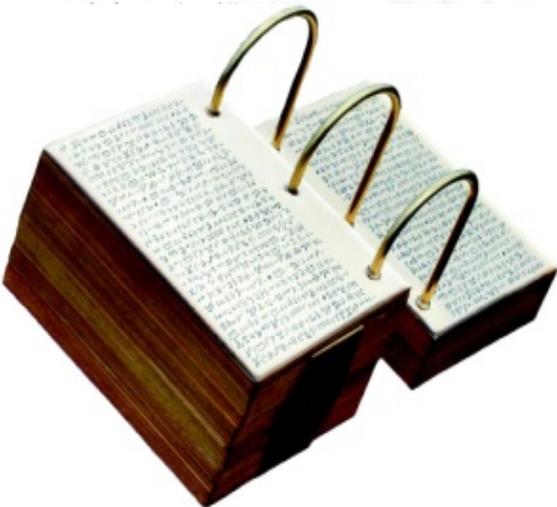
Discovery

In March 2001, William Saturno went to verify reports of the existence of two inscribed stelae at San Bartolo in the Peten. What began as a three-hour trek turned into a harrowing three-day marathon. When the team reached the site, they found no stelae. Suffering from frustration, fatigue, and lack of food and water, Saturno sought refuge in the shade and coolness of a looter's tunnel in an unexcavated pyramid. Soon he began beaming his flashlight around. He was stunned by what he saw—part of a Maya mural in pristine condition. An excited Saturno called in the experts.

Following this discovery of the first well-preserved murals since those at Bonampak in 1946, important steps have been taken to preserve them, such as conservation, cleaning, recording, and stabilizing. Looters left one of the walls hanging in mid-air, so one of the first tasks was to reconstruct a supporting base.

The mural room, buried 50 feet beneath subsequent buildings, adjoins an 80-foot tall pyramid that incorporates six earlier building phases that date back to around 600 BC. The building in which the mural was found was completed in the last phase of construction. They named the pyramid Las Pinturas because of the murals.

The north wall of the mural building measures approximately 14 feet long and the west, 31 feet. The east wall had been totally destroyed by the Maya in later building projects. Fortunately fragments have been found that have allowed the team to begin reconstructing parts of the east wall. The mural most likely ran along all four sides of the room for a total of approximately 90 feet.



The room had five doorways: three on the front and one on each side at the rear of the room. The west wall has remains of five beams that stretched across the top of the room creating a flat ceiling, as opposed to the usual corbel arch found in Maya constructions. One had to duck to enter, but when standing upright after entering, one looked directly at the murals.

To ascertain a date for the murals, they took five radiocarbon samples from three contexts: the mural, floor, and fill. The result from the mural plaster yielded a date between 230-50 BC which they round out to 100 BC. The floor sample averaged to 50 BC and the fill to sometime before AD 20. The 100 BC date is a couple hundred years earlier than first suspected and published in the December 2003 *National Geographic*.

Murals

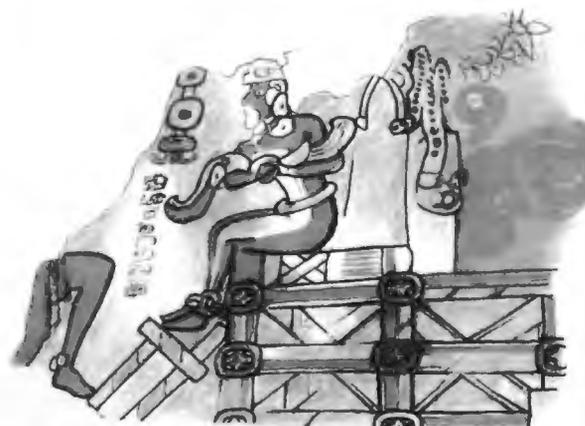
Heather Hurst, who worked extensively in conservation and preservation of the Bonampak murals, is the main artist for the San Bartolo project. Using her extensive knowledge of the Bonampak murals, she compared and contrasted them with those at San Bartolo. Nine hundred years separate the execution of the murals. Bonampak dates to approximately AD 800.

In discussing the architectural setting, Hurst pointed out that both buildings had been built to “house” the murals and were well planned beforehand. The walls, prepared for the paint with layers of stucco, exhibit highly advanced limestone preparation created by skilled craftsmen.

San Bartolo employs conservative colors including black, red, yellow, peach, pink, and some blue. The artists used red and white for skin tones, which Hurst believes implies deities. At Bonampak no two figures have the same skin tone/color. The murals here are resplendent with Maya blue, a color, Hurst said, that is most difficult to reproduce. She concludes this is a display of conspicuous consumption similar to coating cathedrals in gold leaf.

The content of both murals contrast markedly. Where the San Bartolo murals are mythical or ideological, dealing with religious beliefs, Bonampak's are political. The San Bartolo murals were meant for the public. They resemble a medieval stained

glass window whose purpose was to teach Biblical stories. Those at Bonampak glorify the personal history of the king and events in his life and were private, to be viewed only by family or those selected.



Drawing: Glenn Scott

This portion of the north end of the west wall mural mirrors the scene on the south end—one of accession. At present, it is unclear if the figures represent real kings or divinities. The hieroglyphs before the throne would probably clear this up, but they differ just enough from later glyphs that decipherment has not yet happened. David Stuart, the leading epigraphic scholar, believes the Maya had many manuscripts prior to the birth of Christ.

Writing

The hieroglyphic texts in the San Bartolo murals, a series of glyphs executed in an early “swirl” style, are captions for people or scenes and, at present, not understood except for the glyph commonly translated as *ahau* (lord). David Stuart related that the glyphs differ too much from later inscriptions.

Experts are not sure exactly when writing first appeared in the Lowlands, but during the first century BC writing experienced a rapid advance. And, when that happened, or “when writing took off in the Lowlands, it stops in the Highlands.”

Most of the earliest writing examples in the Lowlands are found on small, portable objects. The small scale of the early glyphs leads Stuart to believe that writing originated not on structures but from a manuscript tradition. He suggested that folded books must have been an ancient practice, but unfortunately no examples survive from the Preclassic period. Archaeologists have found pieces of codices at Uaxactun, and a number of scenes on pottery shows codices and people writing and reading and manipulating “books.”

The theme of warfare is not as evident as

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in the earlier inscriptions, which mainly refer to kings and their accomplishments or, more likely, the dedication of a building or monument. Generally speaking, Classic inscriptions (AD 250-800) boast about wars and captives, kings and ancestors.

Creation Mythology

Karl Taube's talk centered on the creation story portrayed in the murals and his inter-

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pretation of some of the iconography. The murals, painted around 100 BC, parallel the well-known story of creation found in the Popol Vuh, one of the surviving written Maya documents from the 16th century. The experts found this extremely surprising and enlightening. They had not imagined that the creation "myth" sprung from such early roots.

Taube believes the murals illustrate Maya beliefs. "It's like their Bible." The flowering, black mountain represents a place of resurrection or a paradisiacal place. This mountain forms a cave that's exhaling a plumed serpent – or breath/wind. This is the basic form of Quetzalcoatl and *predates* Quetzalcoatl examples at Teotihuacan in northern Mexico.

Some symbols signify opposites: life/death; morning/night. The bottle gourd holds water; the tamales represent food. The central figure hands food and water to the person kneeling behind, symbolic of life-giving water and food.

One of the exciting things at the symposium was the exhibition of drawings of the west wall displayed for the first time. Photographing these new drawings by symposium attendees was prohibited. Taube thinks the west wall was a copy from a manuscript. At opposite ends of the west wall are scenes of accession: a king sitting on a scaffold or throne. It is unclear at this time if the figures represent real kings or divinities.

Between the two accession scenes are five trees. The first three represent the three basic elements of creation: heaven, earth, and underworld or waters. A bird symbolizes the heavens or sky; a deer hunter for

earth; and a fisherman, the waters.

The murals exhibit seven different examples of the Maize God who plays a central role in Maya religion. Taube believes the whole theme of the murals relates the birth, death, and resurrection of the Maize God. "Christ is Maize; Maize is Christ." He projected the Christian cross used by the Maya today on the overhead screen and suggested a correlation of the Maize God's resurrection to the present-day Maya belief in the resurrection of Christ. This observation brought a collective gasp from the audience who had never considered such a correlation before!

Michael Coe stated that the two most important gods of the Preclassic Maya (500 BC to AD 250) were the

Principal Bird Deity, or Itzamna the main deity, and the Maize God.

Significance for Believers in The Book of Mormon

We believe some startling statements and conclusions given at the symposium contribute to the continually growing evidence of support for the truth of The Book of Mormon as a true historical account of God and his dealings with peoples in the New World. These are our insights on what was presented.

Writing

Stuart commented that when writing appeared in the Lowlands, it stopped in the Highlands. This observation is truly astounding because it matches so closely what the record relates. When Mosiah and his group left the Land of Nephi (Highlands) and went down to the Land of Zarahemla (Lowlands) and met with the Mulekites, they brought records with them and their knowledge of writing (Omni 1:26-33). Approximately 150 years later, the record informs us that when some of the Nephites returned to the Highlands (or Land of Nephi) they taught the Lamanites their language and to write since they had not maintained that skill. "And thus the language of Nephi began to be taught among all the people of the Lamanites. . . they taught them that they should keep their record, and that they might write one to another" (Mosiah 11:51).

The second observation Stuart made is also of great importance and another watershed conclusion. He said writing originated

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from a manuscript tradition. He believes that, although no real examples have survived or been found, the early Maya had many written books prior to the Classic era.

Numerous examples from The Book of Mormon confirm this “manuscript tradition.” King Benjamin (approximately 200 BC) caused his proclamation to be written so those unable to hear him would have a copy to read to know what he said (Mosiah 1:36-38). When Alma went to preach to the people in Ammonihah, he witnessed the burning of their scriptures (Alma 10:46). It seems safe to say that many of these people had their own copies. When Alma preached to the Zoramites, the poor people, he told them, “Ye ought to search the scriptures.... Do ye remember to have read what Zenos, the prophet of old, has said concerning prayer or worship?” (Alma 16:176-177). This implies that even the poor could read and had copies of the scriptures.

“Now behold, *all* those engravings which were in the possession of Helaman, were written and sent forth among the children of men throughout all the land . . . (emphasis added; Alma 30:16-17).” Perhaps, though, one of the best references is found in Helaman. “There are *many books* and many records of every kind, and they have been kept chiefly by the Nephites” (emphasis added; Helaman 2:14).

What happened to all these books? Most, if not all, perished. This is why the prophet Jacob relates that, although it is difficult to write on metal plates, they do it *so the record will remain*. Jacob writes,

Whatsoever things we write upon anything save it be upon plates, must *perish and vanish away* (emphasis added; Jacob 3:1-2).

This was written after 545 BC and implies the “early manuscript tradition” Stuart introduced.

The importance of these two conclusions by a leading expert in the field of epigraphy cannot be underestimated.

Iconography

Taube’s suggestion that the mural depicts the birth, death, and resurrection of the Maize God and its similarities to the Christian belief of Christ was nothing short of amazing. Another element of his interpretations of the symbolism that mirrors Christian beliefs was the creation of the three major domains: heaven, earth, and waters, thus reflecting the same account

found in the Bible and The Book of Mormon. “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea...” (Exodus 20:11; Mosiah 1:118). See also Genesis 1:3 and 5. Much of the meaning of the murals, though, remains to be analyzed.

The Timeframe

The discovery of these marvelously executed murals dating to 100 BC, along with work being done at the site of El Mirador, fits the timeframe of a major portion (about 60 percent) of The Book of Mormon (approximately 270 BC to AD 36.). Formerly, much of the archaeological investigations have been at sites that date after the close of The Book of Mormon, AD 420, and although these discoveries have provided collaborative evidences of aspects found in The Book of Mormon, work in the Preclassic time period should be even more illuminating.

San Bartolo, a small site, sits close to its contemporary, gigantic El Mirador. Saturno said the discoveries at San Bartolo provide clues to what has yet to be found at El Mirador, like great works of art, more inscriptions, and references to kings. El Mirador is not the anomaly once thought.

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The implications from this symposium for future discoveries at El Mirador are promising. “This mural wasn’t a practice run, it was a masterpiece.” Yet it appeared in a relatively small Maya town with only a few thousand people. “If San Bartolo had murals this early,” says Saturno, “everybody had them.” The excavation of these murals and other Preclassic (500 BC to AD 250) Maya sites represents the cutting edge of knowledge about the ancient Maya. This is exciting.

The Maya and Their Future

Following the presentations and before

the Q&A session, the Vice President of Guatemala David Stein awarded “la Orden del Quetzal” (the order of the Quetzal), their highest honor, to Michael Coe in observation of his more than sixty years’ contribution in archaeology. Our PSI group attending the symposium was thrilled to be present at such a prestigious ceremony!

After the award, Stein, and other members of the audience who were part of a large contingent from Guatemala, spoke of the rebirth of interest by the present-day Maya in their original culture and expressed gratitude for the role archaeologists and epigraphers have played in restoring to them a knowledge of their ancestors.

Because they lack a continuous written history, much of this knowledge has been lost. Many of the six million Maya descendants living today yearn to know of their heritage and their ancestors.

Hearing of these yearnings and desires filled our hearts with joy! Unbeknownst to them, they are moving toward fulfillment of

the promises found in The Book of Mormon extended specifically to them. Samuel the Lamanite prophesied that “even if they should dwindle in unbelief, the Lord shall prolong their days until the time shall come which hath been spoken by our fathers . . . concerning the restoration of our brethren the Lamanites again, to the knowledge of the truth” (Hel 5:101).

A purpose of The Book of Mormon, found not only on the Title Page but throughout the writings of the book’s prophets, is to restore the Lamanites to a knowledge of their forefathers and to tell

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them that they believed in Christ. Jacob eloquently expressed,

We can write a few words upon plates, which will give our children, and also our beloved brethren, a small degree of knowledge . . . concerning their fathers. Now in this thing we do rejoice; and we labor diligently to engraven these words upon plates, hoping that our beloved brethren, and our children, will receive them with thankful hearts, and look upon them, that they may learn with joy, and not with sorrow, neither with contempt concerning their first parents: For, for this intent have we written these things, that they may know that we knew of Christ, and we had a hope of his glory, many hundred years before his coming, and not only we, ourselves, had a hope of his glory, but also all the holy prophets which were before us (Jacob 3:2-4).

The longings of the descendants of The Book of Mormon peoples to know of their past reminds us that we are in the latter days, poised on the threshold of seeing these promises and prophecies fulfilled. If they are excited at this juncture about learning their history through archaeology, we can only imagine their great joy when they embrace the knowledge that their fathers and their first parents knew of Christ and were visited by Him, and that they are the latter-day remnant of the house of Israel. This is the most exciting thing of all. What a glorious day that will be!

Conclusion

Truly the Lord is moving “with power and great glory” to show us the ancient record is true. We anticipate more marvelous witnesses to come forth in the near future.

The official San Bartolo web page:

<http://www.sanbartolo.org/>

National Geographic:

www.nationalgeographic.com/