

Rise and fall of Maya Civilization revealed in New Chiapas Find

Janet Leslie Schwartz, TheNewsMexico.com -

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Part I

TONINA, Chis. - Between pine-forest highlands and lush Lacandon jungle in Mexico's southernmost state of Chiapas, an elaborate portrait of the long lost Maya leader 'Sun of Darkness' or 'Smoke in Jupiter' was uncovered last November.

The discovery of this delicately-decorated stone slab - by archeologist Juan Yadeun - sheds light on a little known era of Maya history.

Its low relief depiction of the Maya leader, on the near human size slab, dates back to the early seventh century AD, the apogee of the Classic Maya civilization.

"This find is different from anything we've seen so far," Yadeun said to *thenewsmexico.com*.

"These are the years just previous to the great collapse of the Teotihuacan civilization in the central valley of Mexico, the time of its maximum splendor, yet also the pivotal point of transformation," he added.

This extraordinary find was made at Toniná, or 'house of the sacred calendar stones,' which lies between the ancient colonial city of San Cristóbal de las Casas and Palenque.

This is the land of the vainglorious Priest-King, Pakal, who constructed his own tomb there under the Temple of the Inscriptions in the same century.

Shortly thereafter, the artistic style at Toniná "completely changes to high relief," said Yadeun.

Three hundred years later the Maya civilization mysteriously vanished. It had once occupied the lowland regions of Chiapas, Mexico; Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and Honduras.

Over the following centuries, nature enveloped and reclaimed these ill-destined Maya cities for itself.

Yadeun's find - a new clue to the Maya civilization - came at the end of last season's excavations, just before Ernesto Zedillo's government left office. However, it was kept under wraps until the incoming government of President Vicente Fox made positive headway into negotiations with the local masked Zapatista Maya rebels.

In this fine example of Maya art, the full-figure portrait of the still buried lord 'Sun in Darkness' counts out the Maya years 'nine to nine' to honor time as he casts pine-resin copal incense into a burning brazier.

According to accompanying hieroglyphic inscriptions 'Sun in Darkness' ascended to power in 613 AD.

Yadeun has worked for the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) at the site over the last two decades.

He said that on this treasured Maya calendar date, 'Sun in Darkness' appears with the God of Coronation and "all that must be done is to literally crown him."

Whilst working on the fourth of seven platforms at Toniná, the largest pyramid-acropolis of Mesoamerica, Yadeun exclaimed, "this governor stands on ceremony - the moment of transition to power!"

During the first millenium the ancient city of Toniná was constantly modified as new dynasties rose and fell, leaving several layers buried under one another.

At the end of this constant repetition of renaissance and destruction, Toniná finally ascended 13 meters (43 feet) higher than Teotihuacan's enormous temple of the Sun and was twice as large.

This pyramid-acropolis in the ancient Maya lowland realm has both the earliest recorded date of 40 AD, as well as the latest, 909 AD. Until this recent uncovering of the 'Sun of Darkness' stone, however, there was a lack of substantial evidence of the Classic period at the site.

The sculpture of 'Sun of Darkness' is "from an age in Maya history that, until now, we had little evidence of here," the archeologist reiterated.

"Yet, buried here under Toniná, there is still a period from 400 to 650 AD - that until now, we knew virtually nothing about," Yadeun noted.

Investigations continue among the 13 temples and four palaces that ascend from a 35-acre base and rise 80 meters (260 feet) toward heaven.