

Richard M. Leventhal, the Williams Director

UNIVERSITY OF
PENNSYLVANIA
MUSEUM OF
ARCHAEOLOGY AND
ANTHROPOLOGY
BY DEBORAH I.
OLSZEWSKI

ON JULY 1, 2004, a new era at the Penn Museum began when Richard M. Leventhal, noted Mesoamerican scholar, officially assumed the Charles K. Williams Directorship. Leventhal begins his tenure with a footnote that may well be unique in the world of museum directors. One of his men-

tors during his student days was Jeremy A. Sabloff, Penn Museum's outgoing director. In the twists and turns of the anthropological world, Leventhal has in one sense come full circle.

While Sabloff influenced his undergraduate career, as a graduate student at Harvard, Leventhal worked with the late Gordon R. Willey, the eminent Americanist. Leventhal's Ph.D. research focused on the Maya site of Copan, where Willey and Leventhal instituted the first excavation of the modern era at that site. *Expedition* readers will recognize this important site, in part, because of Penn Museum's later excavations there led by Robert J. Sharer.

Leventhal's research at Copan was the impetus for his long-standing interest in the concepts of identity and culture, and how these can be examined using archaeological information. He has carried this theme through several projects as it became clear to him that the ancient Maya were far more regionally diverse than existing research models had assumed. The ancient Maya of Copan, for example, had a cultural identity distinct from that of Tikal, including archaeological differences in architectural styles, ceramic designs and forms, and hieroglyphics.

Examining regional identities of the Maya has helped Leventhal study major issues, such as the short-term survival of some regions after the collapse of the Maya around AD 800,

one of the most dramatic depopulations in the past. His work with colleague and former Penn Professor Wendy Ashmore at the Lowland Maya site of Xunantunich in Belize, for example, illustrates how this process worked.

Xunantunich is a Late to Terminal Lowland Classic Maya regional center, a settlement that socially and politically controlled its surrounding area. It survived the Maya collapse for a brief period, suggesting that, at that time, it was somewhat independent of the larger Maya social and political system. Archaeological evidence suggests that the rulers at Xunantunich solidified their power for as long as possible after the collapse. One mechanism its rulers used to consolidate power was to construct actual walls between themselves and their public.

Leventhal's reconstructions of Maya regional identities have now moved away from strictly archaeology. He currently focuses on bringing together data from archaeology and ethnohistory, which integrates information from historic documents and field excavations. Leventhal's latest project, for example, concentrates on how Historic Period Maya define themselves and their regional identities. He has been studying the Yucatan Maya "Caste War" of the mid-19th century to understand moments of identity crisis during periods of instability and change.



Richard M. Leventhal (left) and two graduate students examining an excavation trench at Xunantunich in 1997.



The north side of the Castillo during the 1997 excavations. This pyramid rises more than 130 feet above the ground surface.

In particular, Leventhal examines the cultural symbols used by groups of people in these situations. What he learns from his new research will help him arrive at a better understanding and explanation of ancient Maya regional identities.

As the Penn Museum's Director, Leventhal will use his cross-disciplinary experience to help guide the institution along the paths of intellectual conversations. He would like to see an increased emphasis on large-scale, cross-disciplinary collaborations to consider fundamental questions about humanity's past and present.

What, for example, are the connections between political systems, cultural world views, regional identities, social roles, and geography, and how can they be integrated to understand better the rise and collapse of complex societies such as those found in ancient Egypt and in Mesoamerica? What links between research in genetics, chimpanzee behavioral studies, the archaeology of sub-Saharan Africa, the biomechanics of walking upright, and the study of the brain can help us interpret aspects of human evolution and the appearance of modern cultural behavior?

Another of his goals is to bring these scholarly discussions to the public through exhibitions, public forums, conferences, books, and websites.

Penn Museum welcomes Richard M. Leventhal as its new Williams Director. 🏠

DEBORAH I. OLSZEWSKI is a Lecturer in the University of Pennsylvania's anthropology department and a Research Associate at the Museum.



A long excavation trench uncovering household features at the Caste War village of San Pedro Siris, Belize.



Detailed excavation of household trash at San Pedro Siris.