Send Me Mr. Burkitt...Some Whisky and Wine!

Early Archaeology in Central America

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At the end of the last century, the pre-Columbian ruins of Mexico and Guatemala attracted adventurers and archaeologists whose names are known to every modern student of the Maya. Maler, Morley, Thompson...Maudslay...Thompson...these were the leaders of the greatest chapters in Mesoamerican archaeology. Yet there were others, who were the most insignificant, whose contributions are often neglected, who also deserve a place in the Maya story.

Among the most eccentric of this group of lesser-known figures was Robert Burkitt. He traveled to Guatemala and excavated in the Alta Verapaz region on behalf of the University Museum for a period of time. Some of the finest Maya objects acquired during the Museum's early years stem from his activities. Yet Burkitt always felt that archaeology was merely a hobby, a distraction from his primary work of cataloguing Maya languages and creating a Maya grammar. Ironically, only fragments of that linguistic research survive; the magnificent artifacts sent back to Philadelphia over the course of several decades provide his lasting memorial.

Robert James Burkitt was born on January 19, 1869, in Athlone, County Galway, Ireland, the oldest of seven children of the Reverend Thomas Henry Burkitt and his wife, Emma Eliza. The ministry provided a precarious livelihood and, at fourteen, Robert was sent to live with an aunt and uncle in Nova Scotia, to obtain an education not possible at home. Family letters and the recollections of friends reveal him even then to have been a fiercely independent, determined to make his fortune in the Canadian Northwest, or perhaps in distant Tasmania. At Dalhousie College in Halifax, where he took honors in mathematics, his poverty and his pride, coupled with a natural penchant for solitude, contributed to his reputation as a hermit.

Cambridge and Copan

From Dalhousie, he went to Harvard to study mining, and spent many of his leisure hours with a small group of other young displaced Canadians. He struck up a friendship with one among them, a young student named George Byron Gordon (Fig. 2). The two had shared interests; in addition to their common Canadian background, both were engineers, accomplished draftsmen, and good artists. After graduation in 1891, Gordon went off to Central America, while Burkitt found work with the Boston Board of Survey. It was hardly the adventurous life he had envisioned for himself; yet he stayed with it for almost three years. One can imagine the enthusiasm with which he greeted Gordon's suggestion that he go to Honduras to excavate the Maya ruins of Copan.

Harvard's Peabody Museum had supported three previous seasons at Copan. Gordon had been second in command when John Owen, the young Director of the Third Copan Expedition, died of fever on February 23, 1892. Gordon took charge of the expedition and concluded its business in such exemplary fashion that when the Fourth Copan Expedition was organized in 1894, he was named its Director. It was at that juncture that he extended the invitation that would change Burkitt's life.

On December 3, 1894, Burkitt was appointed Chief Assistant to the Director for the season of 1894–95, with the understanding that all my experiences are to be paid, from the time of my leaving Cambridge until the return of the expedition in April or May, 1895, and that I am to receive a salary of twenty-five dollars a month during the time specified above. Not until January was Gordon able to complete preliminary arrangements, and notify his employers. “If you are ready to come, I am.”

George Byron Gordon, in 1891.

To travel from Boston to Honduras was a modest feat in 1895. The first leg of the journey was by train to New Orleans, and from there by steamer to the port of Livingston in Guatemala. It was snowing as Burkitt sailed from New Orleans in early February. Shipboard accommodations were poor, state rooms were small and smelly, the drinking water tasted of limes, and the weather continued rough all the way to Guatemala. At Livingston, Burkitt transferred to a small river boat for the trip up the Rio Dulce to Yzabal, a journey of breathtaking beauty. Little has changed on the river since then. On either side of the wide, gentle current, the hills rise heavy with the dark green of tropical foliage. Brilliantly colored birds call from the trees, splash close to the water, then soar high above. The ruins of an old Spanish fort stand just at the point where the river is born. Once beyond, the into the indigenous and language of the tropics, it must have seemed the embodiment of every dream.

From the town of Yzabal, the trip was overland by road and foot to the site of Copan, in Honduras. Once there, between bouts of fever, Burkitt prodded Gordon in excitement to excavating the magnificent Classic Maya site. He dug trenches, unearthed artifacts, learned the nuances of photography, and mastered the technique of taking mold impressions of ancient stone monuments. Neither Burkitt nor Gordon had any formal training in archaeology, but both had learned how to excavate from John Owen, and now, he taught Burkitt. Their season lasted a scant five months, but it was long enough for the country and the way of life to captivate the apprentice archaeologist completely. At the end of June, when Gordon returned to Cambridge, Burkitt chose to remain in Central America.

Central America at the Turn of the Century

Guatemala in the 1890s was a land rich with promise. A number of North Americans had come to Guatemala after the Civil War to start a new life. Europeans heard of new opportunities, and they too came to stay. Heinrich Dieseldorf arrived in Cobán in 1885 and created a prosperous trading and importing business, other Germans came, followed by the English, Swiss and French. The influx of foreigners was seen as economically beneficial for the country, and encouraged by the government.

In 1857, Justo Rufino Barrios, the dictator of Guatemala, abolished communal land ownership by the Indians. In 1880, he alcazari Indian land titles, which upon vast areas of land for-
merely controlled by Indian towns were made available to the planters. The lands of the Alta Verapaz and the Pacific slopes were well suited to coffee cultivation; new mines exploited the mineral riches of the Alta Verapaz. The dis-enfranchised Indians provided the labor. Coffee plantations and commercial trading centers multiplied. The country bustled with new enterprise, and greater economic expansion was forecast. The lure of land and fortune brought adventurers, misfits and idealists, who carved huge fincas (plantations) out of the forests and developed their own, idiosyncratic society. In such circumstances, a mining engineer with a talent for languages and a knowledge of archaeology could dream of creating his own small kingdom.

When he first came to Guatemala as Gordon's assistant, Burkitt met the small colony of foreign planters who lived near the small village of Senalca north of Lake Izabal. All the settlers in the region would converge on the town of Izabal to meet the superintendent supply boat. Thus, each journey Burkitt made to Izabal for supplies included an evening of good company with people unlike any he had known in Boston. These settlers had endured hardships, had lost themselves against disease and natural disasters, and knew their own resources. They accepted eccentricity in themselves and tolerated it in others. When the Peabody season ended and Gordon left, Burkitt moved in with an Irish planter named Curley. In those days, when plantations were several days’ ride from each other, hospitality was extended to anyone coming in from the trail. Guests, expected or unexpected, would be granted a comfortable bed, good food, and pleasant company for as long as they wished to stay. Burkitt’s visit with Curley lasted for several years, until one day his extended host informed him, “Burkitt, your visit is over.”

Undaunted, Burkitt packed his saddlebag and rode to Sepetá, a finca owned jointly by an English couple named Owens, and Kenneth and Walter Champney, two young cousins from New England. He rode up in time for tea on hearing of his plight. Mrs. Owens invited him to stay at least the night. Naturally, the visit was prolonged. Burkitt’s skills were of occasional service on the finca; furthermore, he had great charm, humor, and conversation talents when Senalca folks were to exercise them. Weeks passed into months, and he showed no sign of leaving. He and Kenneth Champney became great friends. Although he would disappoint for weeks or months, Burkitt always returned to take up residence once again. Finally, the Owens and the Champneys accepted the inevitable; a guest house was built for his use, and Sepetá became his only permanent home in the Alta Verapaz (Fig. 3). Years later, when the Owens family sold their interest in the finca to Kenneth Champney, it was understood that “Burkitt goes with Sepetá.”

During those early years, Burkitt worked as a surveyor, served as an assessor for a coffee plantation, owned an interest in several mining companies, bought his own small finca, and tried his hand at trading. Always, he wandered the highlands, visiting Indian villages, learning the languages and customs of the different Maya groups, exploring overgrown ruins, and beholding at all times in a manner most singular. Perhaps it was as early as 1904 that he began to wear the costume from which he never deviated in later life: high soft boots, khaki pants, Indian cotton shirt, and a cotton bag slung over his shoulder. These clothes, which looked like nothing more than the simple garb of the Lluninado, were made to his measure. Burkitt owned a jacket, which he carried but never wore, just as he never wore a tie, even when calling on the finca owners and their families. The urge to decorate ran high, however, particularly among some of the English planters. One diminutive British lady stopped him at her front door with a firm, “You can’t come in this house unless you’re properly attired, Mr. Burkitt.” He solved the problem by tying the two strings that hung from his collarless shirt in an approximation of a string tie. His hair, always thick, had become quite sparse, and he took to shaving his head.

Linguistic Endeavors

He had many friends among the Kekechi-speaking Maya. He rode with them, showed him ancient burial caves, explored with him the ancient sites, and patiently answered his endless questions about their language. He prided himself on having learned their language better than any other outsider, and would spend weeks on the trail to verify the precise meaning of a phrase or the pronunciation of...
word as used in some remote village. Once sure of its meaning, he would return to Sepucapuc, and pick up a week's or month's conversation with his friends as if no more than five minutes had elapsed. In 1901, he sent an article on the Kekchi language to Charles Bowditch at Harvard, and asked that Bowditch seek the proper means of publication:

"I have given several years to the observation of Kekchi; and may think, without presumption, that I have gained a more precise knowledge of it than any other traveller . . . I meant to write a grammar. In 1904, I found it necessary to compile a dictionary . . . I have not consulted the statements of other writers. The only book on Kekchi that I have seen, or heard of, is one published in Zurich, 1896, by a Dr. Stoll, and he must have been a rat of the language. His book is brief, and blank, and packed with irrecoverable in sounds, grammar, and meanings."

Bowditch sent Burkill's "Notes on the Kekchi Language", but it was rejected, and the valuable contribution by the author with a remarkably good ear and published in the American Anthropologist, with certain editorial changes that incensed the author. Always quick to take offense when he felt his scholarship, or his honor, had been slighted, Burkill never forgot and never forgave. Two years after publication, his sense of outrage still fresh, he recounted Bowditch's insult in a long letter to Bowditch. He included a detailed explanation of the Maya mathematics contained in his article and showed why the "correction" of his manuscript had muddled the whole thing, and suggested that the editor should have consulted "any primer of algebra" before presuming to correct the manuscript. Bowditch was not continued in the American Anthropologist.

Despite Burkill's obviously prickly nature, Bowditch considered hiring him to work for the Peabody Ethnology as an ethnologist under George Byron Gordon's evaluation of his old friend and assistant. For reasons unexplained, Bowditch implied that Burkill would make a success studying Indian languages, but he would not do as an explorer.

Burkill and The University Museum

Gordon's career had taken him from Central America to a teaching position at Harvard. In 1903, he became curator of the Free Museum of Science and Art (later renamed The University Museum) as assistant curator, and was appointed Curator of American Archaeology in 1904, and Director in 1910. During these years, Burkill and Gordon kept up a sporadic correspondence. Apparently, Gordon's opinion of his friend's talents had changed, beginning in 1905 he and Burkill engaged in discussions that finally concluded in 1912, led to an agreement whereby Burkill would spend part of each year exploring and acquiring antiquities for the Museum for $100 a month plus expenses. By this time, Burkill had had three articles published, and had acquired some small reputation as an antiquary. He and Gordon had discussed his linguistic work as well as his potential archaeological contributions, and he had felt that Gordon would edit any articles submitted for the Museum Journal because his interest was more in the Maya than the distinguished editor of American Anthropology. Burkill's spelling, always slightly individual, had taken on the idiosyncratic style that would plague typesetters for twenty years. In an unpublished note which accompanied a mycological treatise sent to Gordon, he explained:

"My spelling of the English, or course I don't care about. When Mr. Roosevelt and people were talking about spelling reform, I undertook to use a reformed spelling for a certain time, and it now costs me as much effort to go back to common spelling. But there are two small points in my spelling, that I think might be adhered to. They have a bearing on the Indian. One point is my spelling for example o woodpecker. You see in the tale, that he has wood pecker as two words, but I have always, dare say, would mostly make it one. And in a quantity of other combinations, in doing that, I have been more precise; but I have not been as consistent as I might have been if I had taken the trouble to make up a new spelling."

His . . . reports of archaeological activities never failed to include fascinating bits of information on Maya folklore, ritual, crafts, and myths.

Burkill's Approach to Archaeology

It is interesting to note that although his work for the Museum required that he concentrate on archaeological objects for display, Burkill believed that archaeological exploration should be regional in scope. In a letter to Gordon, dated July 14, 1905, he suggested: "The Alta Verapaz is sprinkled with Indian sites, but the upper courses of the rivers I think they should be explored not as individuals but as a whole, or as a group."

Burkill's travels for the Museum were frequently delayed and his itinerary subject to change due to unstable political and natural disasters. Revolutions and armed intrusions were occasional additions to the ordinary problems of yellow fever, torrential rains, danger of arrest at the hands of overly eager provincial officials, and raids from across the Mexican border. He became expert at deciding which expeditions to pursue and which to abandon. Burkill's approach to archaeology would be like perhaps at once would be portable 'finds' on some sort to make a showing with, and several
A close-up of Burkitt's grave marker in the British Cemetery in Guatemala City.