Maya 2012: Myth and Reality

TRAVEL THROUGH 4,000 YEARS OF MESOAmerican HISTory WITH THE Penn MUSEum IN THIS SPECIAL EXPANDED EDITION OF EXPEDITION MAGAZINE. THIS ISSUE WAS CREATED TO COMPLEMENT MAYA 2012: LORDS OF TIME, A MAJOR NEW EXHIBITION THAT OPENS AT THE Penn MUSEum ON MAY 5, 2012 AND RUNS THROUGH JANUARY 13, 2013. WE ARE THE ONLY EAST COAST VENUE FOR THIS REMARKABLE COLLECTION OF OVER 100 ARTIFACTS, MANY EXCAVATED FROM THE ANCIENT SITE OF COPAN, HONDURAS, AN EXCAVATION CO-SPONSORED BY THE Penn MUSEum. LARGE SCULPTURAL PIECES FROM COLLABORATING MUSEUMS AND FULL-SIZE REPLICAS OF IMPORTANT MAYA MONUMENTS ARE INCLUDED IN THE EXHIBITION AS WELL.

We begin with “From the Archives,” as Alessandro Pezzati describes the excavation of the Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copan by George Byron Gordon (later Director of the Penn Museum) in the late 19th century. Then we move on to a series of articles that follow the narrative of the exhibition. The first feature article, by Anthony F. Aveni, discusses the current fascination with Maya 2012 and other end-of-the-world scenarios. Robert Sharer answers the question “Who Were the Maya?” as he provides an overview of this great civilization, including maps and a timeline of important events in Maya history. Simon Martin focuses on the Maya writing system, as he describes how Maya calendars were used and what individual hieroglyphs mean. In “Time of Kings and Queens,” Robert Sharer provides fascinating background on early Maya rulers. Loa Traxler discusses the profound changes that occurred in Maya society at the end of the Classic period, as famine, disease, and violence ravaged the once mighty kingdoms. Traxler concludes the discussion on apocalypse and looks to the future in “2012 and Beyond.” The last feature article moves away from the ancient Maya, as three authors—Richard M. Leventhal, Carlos Chan Espinosa, and Cristina Coc—describe the recent history of the modern Maya, in which struggles for self-determination continue. We end with a review by Penn graduate student Sarah Kurnick of a new book by Barbara Fash on the Copan Sculpture Museum, “Museum Mosaic” with news of the Museum, and our new feature: “Looking Back.”

This special Maya 2012 issue of Expedition would not have been possible without the assistance and continued support of Robert Sharer, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Penn and excavator at Copan. Bob provided invaluable help in structuring this issue, and was happy to jump in on short notice to proofread text or provide photographs from his collection.