If you were to fly low over the forests of southeastern Mexico, about 35 km from the border with Guatemala, you would see two immense mounds rising high above the canopy. These ruined pyramids announce the presence of Calakmul, one of the greatest cities of Classic Maya civilization (300–900 CE). Beneath the trees lie 6,000 more structures, including additional temple pyramids, wide plazas, a ballcourt, and residences ranging from grand palaces to humble households, in a dispersed sprawl covering some 33 km². This is my twentieth year of research at Calakmul and, together with my colleagues from Mexico’s Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, we are still trying to unravel its many mysteries.

I wanted to work at Calakmul because it lies at the end of a trail of hieroglyphic clues. The decipherment of the Maya script blossomed in the 1980s and we soon began to read long-enigmatic inscriptions and gain major insights into the history and culture of the region. My research focuses on ancient Maya politics and these developments opened an entirely new vista on the topic. We learned that there were as many as a hundred petty states forming a dense mosaic in the Classic era, but also that they were by no means equivalent in power. Tikal, Guatemala—where the Penn Museum excavated between 1956 and 1970—was one major center, but it had a rival of even greater influence. This was the kingdom of K’ak’ul “Snake” which, from its rise in the 6th century until its decline in the 8th century, was the leading political force in the Classic Maya lowlands and the hub of a network of hierarchical ties that made many other kingdoms its vassals.

Back in 1994 there was already suggestive evidence that Calakmul was the home of those “serpent kings,” but we lacked proof. The problem was the poor quality of Calakmul’s limestone, which erodes easily and renders the vast majority of its 117 carved monu-

Calakmul Structure 1, partly restored, emerges above the forest canopy. Calakmul is located in the Mexican state of Campeche, near the border with Guatemala.
ments illegible today. New excavations played a leading role in finding the names and titles of serpent kings, known from elsewhere, and finally settled the matter.

Since then we have been fortunate enough to make some important discoveries that both refine and expand our picture of life in a great Maya capital. To choose just one, in 2005 my colleagues began to unearth an unprecedented “painted pyramid,” a three-tiered structure that had been protected beneath later construction. Its outer surface is decorated with 39 scenes of people displaying, exchanging, and consuming different goods, all in remarkable preservation. Hieroglyphic captions label many of the participants and describe them as “salt person,” “tobacco person,” “maize person,” and the like. The meaning of these murals is still debated, but I suspect that they adorn a temple dedicated to a surrounding commercial district, evidence for Calakmul’s efforts to control economic activity in its region.

Thousands more mounds lie in the forest and some of them doubtless hide surprises of equal scale. Although the heat, humidity, and barrage of biting insects make work at Calakmul arduous at times, the sight of new inscriptions emerging from the ground compensates for any perceived hardship.

**Simon Martin** is Associate Curator and Keeper of Collections in the American Section. In October 2014, Simon will be investigating the newly cleared and cleaned third tier of the painted pyramid at Calakmul.

**FOR FURTHER READING**


