

ARCHAEOLOGICAL NEWSLETTER



The Committee for Field Archaeology
 Royal Ontario Museum
 100 Queen's Park
 Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2C6

Second Class Mail
 Registration Number 3943
 © Royal Ontario Museum

Series II No. 35, November 1989

PEOPLING THE PAST: HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW?

David M. Pendergast, *New World Archaeology*

Time attacks all. It begins by stripping away the feelings that surrounded an event; we cannot revive the sentiments we experienced in times past, whether good or ill, no matter how we may strive to do so, and those experienced by others were largely beyond our grasp even at the very moment. Time then removes the meaning of the event, often bit by bit but sometimes wholesale, until all of the intangible web that enmeshed something when it occurred is gone. Look at a 19th-century tintype of your great-grandparents, try for a moment to sense their feelings as they endured the vise-like grip of the photographer's clamp for this important occasion, and you will know how fully we have lost the knowledge of our own culture little more than a century ago. Imagine, then, how much greater the barrier is between the archaeologist and a society that lies across a great gulf of time and cultural difference and has left virtually no written record of its achievements, let alone of its people's daily round. How is that gulf to be bridged, if indeed it can really be spanned at all?

Everything we know, or think we know, about ancient cultures is either history, when the written word at least gives us a window on events and attitudes, or prehistory, when the words are absent. The archaeologist who focuses on a time and place depicted by historical records attempts



Fig. 1: Head of a pottery animal figure, probably a child's toy; length 2.5 cm; Altun Ha, 16th century.

by excavation to verify, refute, or amplify what the documents have to say. The other focus forces reliance on evidence from the earth alone; the non-perishable products of human endeavour, and sometimes the very soil itself, become the documents from which the tale must be read. The bridge between us and the unrecorded past is ethnographic analogy, which is to say that we understand an object or the evidence of an event because we perceive its resemblance to something we know.

Show anyone in the world today an ancient stone axe and the object's general use will immediately spring to the viewer's mind, even if a dweller in our far north may not envision the felling of trees with the implement. But what answer would we obtain from some being whose technology used only the laser for cutting? We are often unaware of how fully we depend on

ethnographic analogy, but in fact it is as much at the root of our ability to understand the uses of objects from our own culture of a century or two ago as it is the foundation of archaeological interpretation.

The obvious problem in the use of analogy is that it will work only for objects or processes that are still in use, or at least were in use recently enough to have had every detail set down on paper. Hence the success rate for analogy diminishes in direct proportion to the distance in time that separates the student from the object studied. It also diminishes sharply when the modern world is not derived from the ancient. The third factor that is very likely to affect one's success in using analogy is preservation: where only the most durable materials survive, the gaps in the archaeological record may mask a resemblance to a known object that would explain the artifacts's use. Readers who have followed the account of my work over these many years know that all three of the problems affect the focus of my studies, the ancient Maya.

The Maya material world of a millennium and more ago was replete with perishable riches. Today no more than traces survive; though we cannot calculate the loss with any pretense of precision, it is probable that more than 90% of the material remains of Maya grandeur have succumbed to the incessant attacks of the tropical environment. Hence the documents we must "read" are like tattered bits of parchment with more words missing than present. On rare occasions the reading is aided by modern Maya practice, or even more rarely by the survival in use of an ancient style of object. Usually, however, a glimpse at today's Maya household will reveal precious little that is likely to be a remnant of life in the 1600s, let alone in the middle Classic of A.D. 600. As a result we treasure every occasion on which today's world opens a window on the past, and we know that Western technology's invasion of the Maya area reduces the chance of such an experience day by day.



Fig. 2: Pottery fire-carrier; length 20.2 cm, ca A.D. 850.

In my experience the most striking example of modern identification of an otherwise unidentifiable object came at Altun Ha more than twenty years ago. As we trenched through a large refuse pile dumped in a house abandoned about A.D. 800, we came upon an artifact that looked very much like a pottery flashlight (Fig. 2). Turning the object over and over in my hands, I mused on its use---aloud, I soon learned as my foreman came up behind me and began to provide the answer to my question. To my great surprise, he identified the "flashlight" as something still in use when he was a boy, about 1920. Such things served then as fire-carriers; the hollow handle held combustible material, and a strike-a-light was used to ignite the material so that one could carry fire from place to place. Sure enough,

the top part of the object was blackened inside and out, as were most others we found farther on in the dump and elsewhere around the site in later years. Had the first one emerged from the earth this year there might have been no one around to tell of its use, and we would have been reduced to guessing, as we so often do, and probably guessing wrong, as we so often do. In all likelihood we would have called the fire-carrier a ceremonial object.

Grateful though I am for analogy-provided explanations of artifacts, I am painfully aware that they deal only with a tangible world that is no more than the beginning of the road towards the people themselves. Like all archaeologists, I begin excavation in the sure knowledge that I shall never be able to resurrect the people fully, or understand the minutiae of their daily lives, or feel the emotions that swayed them. Yet I remain hopeful that clues to these matters, however small, will spring from the earth---that the understanding of objects may occasionally produce an understanding of their users.

Time and time again my hopes come to nought as I stand in the cleared-out rooms of an ancient residence and am forced to acknowledge that I cannot divine the use of a featureless cubicle. Here is a place where people lived, and loved, and laughed, and bore children, and grew old, and died; but the life is extinguished, the love cannot be felt, the laughter is beyond my hearing, and the children followed their parents into death long ago. It is sad that of all the facets of life it is usually only its end that has left its traces clear for me to see. There was a time when I approached those traces in a wholly objective manner, recording grave size, burial length, accompanying artifacts, and all the other data as I might set down the dimensions of an axe. In so doing I was, I now recognize, missing another kind of analogy that can invest the past with meaning that is neither precise nor scientific, but nevertheless can tell us something about ancient Maya life, whether



Fig. 3: Bat-effigy pot from a child's grave, height 6.9 cm; Altun Ha, ca A.D. 650.

in city, town, or village. This is the analogy of emotion.

Partly because of the great limitations in our data and partly owing to the archaeologist's striving for some sort of scientific quality in the record of the past, the Maya are usually portrayed as a people who displayed their carefully controlled emotions only in the rigid frame of religious activity. Nonsense. What Maya father can have looked down at his sleeping son and failed to see a mirror of himself? What mother can have raised a daughter without wanting to set her feet solidly on the path to happiness and fulfillment? And, all too often in a time and place where infant mortality was rampant, what parents can have placed their child's body in a grave without knowing a searing pain that would never quite be assuaged? As we excavate a home we cannot document a father's and mother's love for their children, but we know it

existed because the Maya were human. As we methodically record the contents of a child's grave it is a great mercy that we cannot feel the parents' pain, but we can measure its intensity against the yardstick of our own lives. In prehistory, this is probably as close as we can come to restoring humanity to ruined ancient communities.

What, then, of the time when prehistory flowed into history? From the Spaniards' arrival in Belize around 1544 onward, should we not have a written record that will breathe some life into the archaeological remains? The archaeologist's hope is certainly that this will prove true; Spanish priests and their helpers were directed to keep records of baptisms, marriages, and deaths, while secular officials were to collect census and other information on a fairly regular basis. But Belize was a frontier area where record-keeping was evidently anything but a high priority. The few harried Spaniards in the land had the gigantic task of bringing Christianity and European social order to a people who usually failed to recognize immediately their

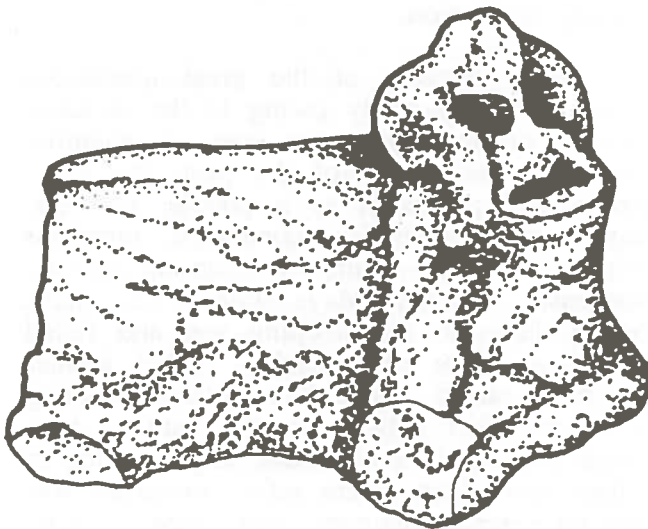


Fig. 4: Animal pinched from clay, probably by a child whose mother was making pots and fired the toy along with her wares; height 4 cm, Altun Ha, A.D. 850 or later.

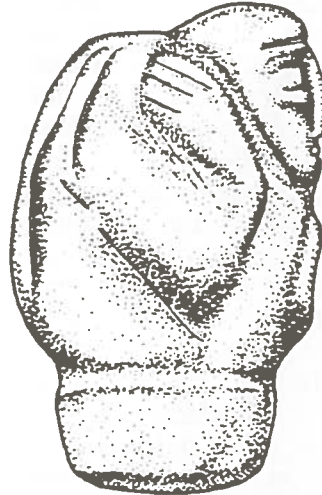


Fig. 5: Burden-bearer, apparently using a forehead strap; Altun Ha, ca A.D. 650.

need for such benefits. For this and other reasons the Spaniards did not follow the dictates of central authority, or if they did they failed to see to the safe housing of the records. As a result, the hope that the Historic period will bring us closer to the Maya as human beings very largely vanishes.

On lamentably rare occasions individual Mayas make brief appearances on the Spanish documentary stage. For Lamanai there is but one: a boy, Ah Chuil, who travelled from Lamanai to the northern Yucatan town of Tibolon in 1560, stayed for a year with a man named Juan Chuil, and then returned to Lamanai. One Lamanai family name, one proof of kinship ties between Lamanai and the north, are all we know from this single record. How much of Lamanai's 3500-year history had the Chuils seen? How large was the family? How did they put food on the table? And, most important of all, where among the remains we excavated is the evidence of their existence? No analogy, no study of historic documents, no examination of the archaeological record will answer these questions. Ah Chuil of 430 years ago and all the Ah Chuils of the centuries before will always be there, just out of reach, challenging me to bring them to life from the tantalizing fragments they left behind.