

New insights into the life of the Maya

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The ruins of Palenque. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Ancient artifacts are almost always concerned with rich and powerful religious and political leaders, but new excavations of an ancient Maya site have unearthed a pyramid decorated with murals depicting the marketing and trading of goods by ordinary people around 1,350 years ago.

The researchers, from Mexico and the USA, found the painted pyramid at Calakmul in Mexico, near the border with Guatemala in 2004. The Classic Maya period lasted from around 300 to 900 AD, and Calakmul was one of the largest cities in the period. The pyramid's murals show people trading, transporting and consuming goods, and many have hieroglyphs describing the people and goods featured in the pictures.

One of the researchers, Simon Martin of the University of Pennsylvania

Museum, described the discovery as a "total shock," saying that nothing like it had ever been found before, since we almost never see what life was like for ordinary people within ancient civilizations, and this is what makes the find at Calakmul so special.

The pyramid resembled a collapsed mound from the surface, but when excavated was found to be a three-tiered pyramid measuring 11 meters (36 feet) per side and 4.7 meters (15 feet) high. They dug a tunnel into the pyramid to explore the interior, and found it had been remodeled several times during a 600 year period. One of the remodelings included the addition of the murals, which the scientists estimate were painted between 620 and 700 AD. The painted layer had been carefully protected with a layer of clay.

It was already known that the Maya had a thriving market economy, but the murals are the best discoveries yet made that show how the market functioned. Examples include pictures of a man mixing ul, a kind of gruel made from maize, another drinking a bowl of it, a woman selling tamales, and a man eating them. On another mural the hieroglyphs describe a man with a spoon and basket as a salt person. Other pictures describe the participants as a "tobacco person" and a "clay vessel person". Still other paintings show the goods being transported to market.

Costumes worn by the figures in the painting include loincloths, simple headbands, and clothing decorated by woven or painted designs. Both genders are depicted wearing jewelry such as necklaces, pendants and earrings. Women are often shown wearing face paint.

The site at Calakmul has been known to archaeologists since 1931 and it has been intensively studied for the last 15 years. The authors of the current study, Carrasco Vargas and colleagues, have been excavating the Chiik Nahb complex, which contains 68 buried structures. The painted

pyramid is known as Structure 1, and could possibly have been a public monument in a marketplace. Over 30 pictures have so far been documented, but excavations are continuing.

The research paper is published online in the November issue of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

More information: Daily life of the ancient [Maya](#) recorded on murals at Calakmul, Mexico; *PNAS*, Published online before print November 9, 2009, [doi: 10.1073/pnas.0904374106](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0904374106)

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