

Archaeologist discovers Maya royal burial

January 8 2016, by Robert Perkins



From inside a tunnel into a pyramid, Tom Garrison inspects a plaster mask left by the Maya.

Tom Garrison was four hours away from camp down a bumpy jungle road—headed into the city to get treated for poisonwood exposure—when he got the call from his co-director Edwin Román.

"You need to get back here right now."

Back at El Zotz, a ruined Maya city hidden deep within Guatemala's Maya Biosphere Reserve, one of Garrison's archaeological teams had hit paydirt—a burial chamber in the Five Temples section of the site that could contain the remains of royalty.

He turned the truck around.

Garrison, an assistant professor (teaching) of anthropology and spatial sciences, is the principle investigator running the archaeological exploration of El Zotz, an isolated and overgrown Maya ruin to which he returns each spring.

Standing 6-foot-3, he sports an impish grin and an impressive knack for recounting any detail of Maya language or history on command. He refers to El Zotz in the royal "we"—when describing its turbulent past, he describes how "we invaded Tikal." Fittingly, has an antagonistic take on El Zotz's more famous big brother to the east.

Tikal is like the Los Angeles to El Zotz's Pasadena: so large, impressive and close that it tends to eclipse its neighbor in the public eye. But El Zotz has proven to be a font of information for archaeologists, helping them to piece together an understanding of the changing political dynamics of the region, and by extension, the Maya people.

A place of royal inspiration

Garrison discovered [archaeology](#) as an undergraduate at Connecticut College, when he enrolled in an introductory course as a freshman. His love for the field was kindled during a junior-year study abroad trip to Oaxaca, Mexico, that included a trip to the Maya site of Palenque.

Now, Garrison works to inspire the same love of exploration into the past through his course offerings at USC and through his Problems Without Passports courses, ANTH 400: "Maya Resilience" and ANTH 450: "Field Research in Maya Archaeology." Both classes allow him to take USC undergraduates to explore Maya ruins in the jungles of Guatemala.

El Zotz, Garrison's home and office every spring, spreads out over roughly two square kilometers of jungle, which includes a massive royal palace and temple on a hill overlooking groups of temples and smaller dwellings in the valley below. Its name is a modern appellation, taken from the Maya word for "bat"—hundreds swarm the skies every evening and then sleep in a nearby cave where the Maya believed that the sun dwelt when not illuminating the world.

During the time of the Maya, it was known as "Pa'chan," meaning "fortified sky."

When the Maya inhabited it 1,500 years ago, they had deforested the whole region, offering the royals above a commanding view of their subjects. Today, the jungle has reclaimed the valley, obscuring it with a thick canopy of trees and vines—much of it sprouting within the old Maya structures.



Tom Garrison (left) stands in front of a Maya pyramid with longtime colleague Steve Houston. Credit: Robert Perkins

Against time and looters

With mere days left in the excavation season—before heavy rains transformed the already-muddy roads that lead to El Zotz into an impassable sludge—Garrison and his crew worked around the clock to excavate the tomb. The team also faced the ever-present threat of looters, endemic in the world of Maya archaeology.

El Zotz alone has 230 trenches and tunnels cut into the site's pyramids and other structures from cunning but unscrupulous diggers who can make a slim profit by selling cultural artifacts on the black market.

Often rich with bowls, figurines and other valuable grave goods, [tombs](#) are a tempting trove for looters. Even with the archaeologists camped near the site and soldiers guarding the biological preserve where it sits, any open tomb is vulnerable once word of its existence gets out.

In 2010, Garrison and his colleagues—at the time led by Brown University's Stephen Houston, a living legend in the Maya archaeology community—brought international attention to El Zotz when they uncovered the intact tomb of a Maya king beneath the Temple of the Night Sun. The tomb resided in a pyramid known as "El Diablo," perched atop the royal hill, across from the Five Temples.

The 40-foot-tall pyramid is the highest point in the city and offers an eye-straining view of the Tikal pyramids, which peak above the jungle to the east. The team's excavators make regular pilgrimages to Diablo's eroding crown—not for the view, but for the cell phone service.



An excavation worker examines a bowl from among the artifacts the researchers collected.

The 2010 discovery occurred just beyond the end of a looter's tunnel in El Diablo—if the looters had dug a little deeper, all that would have been left for Garrison's team would have been an empty void. Instead, they found what National Geographic would later name one of the "discoveries of the year."

"It smelled like death," Garrison said of the tomb. Literally. Unpleasant, but a good sign that the tomb had miraculously managed to remain sealed over the centuries.

It ignited a race to complete the excavation before looters descended. Upon finding the tomb, Garrison and Houston immediately had a conservator flown from the United States to Guatemala to help properly extract and preserve the artifacts. In a taxi on the way to the airport to pick her up, the taxi driver—who recognized Garrison from a previous trip to Guatemala—smiled and said, "I heard you guys found something."

Somehow, word of the discovery had already reached people in the city of Flores.

"That's never what you want to hear this far out," Garrison said. Ultimately, he and his crew found bowls of human fingers, wood carvings, bejeweled teeth, sacrificed infants and more.

Looters of a different kind

Based on the design of other, contemporary Maya temples, researchers theorized that there might be a second tomb in front of the original chamber, and Garrison spent the first part of the field season in search of a second tomb in El Diablo. An excavation of its theorized location ultimately found nothing.

As in 2010, the tomb discovered this summer was found when least expected: Guatemalan archaeologist Jose Luis Garrido was cleaning off a low platform when it gave way, opening a small void. Although untouched by humans, its contents had been looted—by rats.

Tree roots had stretched and pressed through the tomb's walls, giving the rats passage. The furry intruders consumed and destroyed anything organic but left intact four beautiful polychrome bowls. One bore the name of a king: Bakab K'inich, which translates roughly as, "The sun god who is first in the land."

With the clock ticking down, Garrison and his team documented the tomb and preserved its contents with mere days to spare until the end of the field season.

"You never know what's out there, and you never know what you're going to find in any given year," Garrison said. "That's the mystery, and part of the appeal, of archaeology."

Provided by University of Southern California

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