

Maya cave art and modern art thievery

The Maya mystery remains: We know little about these people who tamed the jungles of Central America, built monumental cities, pioneered the mathematical concept of zero, developed sophisticated art styles and invented one of the New World's most complex—and still untranslated—languages. The Maya civilization reached its peak between A.D. 250 and 900 and then, for still unknown reasons, faded away.

Last year two modern Maya farmers explored a large cave system in the Petén region of northern Guatemala and found a number of 1,200-year-old hieroglyphs and paintings on the limestone walls of the cave. These, along with finds from numerous ongoing archaeological digs, may help in the eventual deciphering of the Maya language and the gradual unraveling of the Maya mystery—that is, if the archaeologists can get to the sites before the art thieves do.

The cave, called Naj Tunich or “stone house,” is the most recent example of how art thieves and looters are destroying archaeological sites and jeopardizing the Maya Indian heritage. Soon after National Geographic staff archaeologist George E. Stuart heard about the cave, he got permission from the Guatemalan government to examine it. Looters had already found the mouth of the cave and left behind a small pile of brightly painted pottery fragments. They had also pried apart masonry walls and plundered rectangular cavities that probably were tombs. The looters, however, had not yet penetrated the interior of the cave where Stuart and his colleagues found “some of the most beautiful examples of Maya art.”

The cave art includes paintings of ball players, musicians, dwarfs, a figure performing what may be a religious act of genital mutilation, other graffiti and even erotica. The inscriptions and columns of glyphs included a precise date: one corresponding to Dec. 18, A.D. 738. This date, from the height of the Classic Maya period, is consistent with the pottery found at the cave entrance. Stuart describes the art and hieroglyphs in the August NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC.

Two months after Stuart returned home he received word that Naj Tunich again had been vandalized. Scratches now deface a ball player's arm and smudges appear on a drum. Deep saw marks scar one of the columns where someone tried to slice off the ball court scene. The cave has since been put under armed guard, but that's only one site. Francis Polo Sifontes, director of Guatemala's Institute of Anthropology and History says he has a staff of only 120 guards and inspectors to protect more than 1,000 registered sites. “That's not enough,” he says. “To stop this



Stuart and his son David, an expert in deciphering Maya hieroglyphs, visited the cave a few weeks before looters attempted to cut away the paintings of a kneeling ball player (below).



unfortunate traffic, we'd need the whole Guatemalan army.”

As recently as 15 years ago almost everything archaeological was still intact in Guatemala, but demands of the art market, lack of legislation regulating importing and inadequate policing of sites have all contributed to a dramatic increase in looting. Ancient Maya pottery vases and bowls are coming on the art market at a rate of about 1,000 per month—some selling for as much as \$50,000, though the average is much less.

“The inflated international art market is literally destroying the cultural heritage of Guatemala,” says Wilbur E. Garrett, editor of NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC in an editorial in

the August issue. “Professional looters, simple farmers and even leftist guerrillas in need of money for weapons are systematically plundering ... in violation of national law.”

But international law, such as the UNESCO convention banning illicit commerce in cultural property, may be what is needed to stop the pot traffic. So far, however, few major art-collecting countries have signed the convention, and a bill based on it still is pending in the Senate Finance Committee. Many anthropologists favor the convention, but the American Association of Dealers in Ancient, Oriental and Primitive Art opposes it. Opponents say that each country should be responsible for its own art, and that even if the flow into the United States stopped the art would go elsewhere. Collectors argue that they are performing a service by putting the pottery on a pedestal and protecting it.

In answer to the charge made by some anthropologists that the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC article will increase the value of the pots, Garrett says, “Possibly, but we hope that proper publicity could make stolen objects so ‘hot’ and collecting them so socially unacceptable that plundering might become unprofitable.” □

Herpes-inhibiting drug deployed

Herpes simplex viruses stay walled up behind their protective protein coats and are almost invulnerable to attack. But gradually, researchers are finding chinks in the herpes armor. In 1977, for instance, a drug called ara-A was found to be capable of reducing the incidence of brain damage and death among victims of the rare herpes encephalitis. Now an experimental drug called acyclovir appears to be able to suppress active herpes simplex infections in patients who have undergone bone marrow transplants as treatment for cancer.

Acyclovir already has been successful in inhibiting the replication of herpes simplex viruses in test-tube experiments and in fighting these viruses in animals, so Rein Saral and colleagues at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore tested it on 20 cancer patients. All patients were about to have bone marrow transplants, and all had high blood levels of antibodies against herpes simplex viruses—indicating that they had latent herpes simplex infections and were at high risk of developing active infections. Ten of the patients received acyclovir for three days before the transplant and for 15 days afterward. The others received placebos. In the July 9 NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE, Saral and colleagues report that no active herpes infections developed in patients who had received acyclovir, but infections did develop in seven of the 10 who received the placebo treatment. □