

The Dawn of the Mayas

Francisco Estrada-Belli loves crawling around the dark, damp tunnels of ancient cities. He hopes to find some long-forgotten treasure. He especially likes the tunnels in Guatemala, where an ancient people called the Mayas ruled.



Recently, while inspecting a tunnel in the ruins of Cival, an old Mayan city in northern Guatemala, Estrada-Belli reached into a hole in the wall. Instead of pulling out a fistful of cobwebs, he grabbed onto a very beautiful, well-preserved giant mask of the Mayan sun god.

With that discovery, Estrada-Belli unexpectedly got his hands on a piece of history that would change the way the world thinks about the Mayas.

Estrada-Belli is an **archaeologist**, a scientist who studies ancient civilizations and cultures. He had always known that the Mayas were a highly advanced **civilization**¹. They lived in what is today southern Mexico and Central America, reaching the peak of their power in A.D. 250. The mask and other discoveries suggest that the Mayas were a more **sophisticated**² people 1,000 years earlier than anyone thought.

"There's a whole civilization...we are just beginning to recover," said Estrada-Belli, whose research was funded by the National Geographic Society.

¹ **civilization**: a group of people with a distinct culture and rules

² **sophisticated**: aware, knowledgeable, and experienced

Reading Passage

Developed Society

Scientists knew a lot about the Mayas from earlier discoveries. They knew, for example, that the Mayas constructed great pyramids that rivaled those of ancient Egypt. Scientists also knew that the ancient Mayan cities of Tikal, in Guatemala, and Chichén Itzá, in southern Mexico, were political, economic, and spiritual centers. From those great cities, the Mayas studied astronomy and arithmetic.



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Mayan pyramid, Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico

The Mayas were artists and sculptors. They also developed a calendar and an advanced form of writing. Their society collapsed around A.D. 800.

Important City

Estrada-Belli thinks Cival played a role in the development of Mayan culture thousands of years before Tikal and Chichén Itzá became the **hub**³ of Mayan life.

Ian Graham, of Harvard University, discovered Cival in 1984, when a hurricane ripped away the dense jungle that had **shrouded**⁴ the city. At first, he thought Cival was a minor outpost and ignored the ruins. Estrada-Belli rediscovered Cival four years ago [2000] while searching for a different Mayan city.

Using satellites and the latest in global positioning technology, Estrada-Belli determined that Cival was not just a minor camp. He says Cival had a population of 10,000 and was the capital of an early Mayan kingdom.

³ **hub**: the center of activity; the center part of a wheel

⁴ **shrouded**: covered and hidden as though with layers of cloth (This is the definition of **shrouded** in this sentence and it is used as figurative language. **Shroud** is also defined as the cloth placed over or around a dead body.)

Reading Passage

Once scientists began digging, Cival started to give up more of its buried secrets. Scientists dug up sprawling courtyards, magnificent buildings, and beautiful ceramic vases. They also found a stone pillar showing the reign of an unidentified king. Estrada-Belli thinks the Mayas abandoned Cival around A.D. 500, after invaders sacked the city.

Rewriting History

The discoveries at Cival and other early Mayan sites have scientists scrambling to rewrite Mayan history.

"We've still got a lot to learn," said Graham, who is excited about digging deeper in Mayan history. "Thank goodness."