

THE 936th MEETING OF THE BRODIE CLUB
MINUTES

The 936th meeting of the Brodie Club was held on Jan. 19, 1999 in the Ramsay Wright Building of the University of Toronto.

Chairman: Fred Bodsworth

Recording Secretary: Oliver Bertin

Attendance: 21 members and 13 guests

Edward Thompson, Helen Barron, Bruce & Louise Slemin, Marlene Campitelli, Dorothy Burton, Beverly Rosenberg, Marjorie Bowman, Marilyn Hauk, Barbara Stabler, all guests of Jennifer Young;

Ernest & Sylvia Du Vernet, guests of Jock McAndrews;

Sharon Hick, guest of Fred Bodsworth.

Minutes of the previous meeting were approved with minor amendments on a motion by William Carrick.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Bruce Falls reported that David Fowle has had a difficult time in recent weeks due to illness, but hopes to return home in a few weeks;

Harry Lumsden announced a regional bi-annual meeting of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists will be held on May 15 in Port Hope;

Carrick said a flock of 40 Trumpeter Swans from the Sudbury area arrived safely in south-central Indiana on Dec. 23;

Clair Muller said the federal government is considering the federal Endangered Species Act. She suggested members voice their concerns to Lyle Friesen of the Cdn. Wildlife Survey in Guelph;

Falls reminded members of a show of original avian art at the Robarts Library of the University of Toronto, starting Feb. 25. It includes work by Terry Short.

SPEAKER:

McAndrews introduced David Pendergast, vice-president of collections and research at the Royal Ontario Museum and a world-renowned expert on Mayan archaeology. He joined the ROM in 1964 after studying at the University of California in Berkeley. He has spent 35 years studying the ancient Mayans.

In the 43 years since he first went to Mexico, Pendergast has noticed a major difference in our understanding of this ancient race. In those days, they were seen as a very peaceable people who lived in harmony with each other. "That was absolute nonsense, of course," he said. They are now seen as "human," with many of the same strengths and frailties as our own civilization. Our understanding will probably change markedly over the next 25 years as we learn more about them.

They lived throughout the Yucatan and Chiapas regions of present day Mexico, in Guatemala, Western Honduras and Belize. Nobody is sure where the Mayans came from or who their antecedents were, but they first appeared around 1,500 BC. Their zenith was in the 3rd century AD and the Classical Era lasted until the 9th century. In his work, Pendergast has focussed on Belize, primarily in the ancient cities of Altun Ha, Lamanai and Tipu, all northeast of Belize City. They date to the period 100 to 700 A.D. and were originally seen as backwaters of the Mayan civilization. Consequently, they had been largely ignored by archaeologists.

They were very daunting sites to visit because the ancient buildings looked like natural hills, sometimes 26 meters high and covered with thick tropical rain forest. To add to the difficulty, Mayan buildings often evolved over time as the owners reconstructed the original structure, adding new walls, extra rooms and roofs. He referred to this practice as "The Onion School of Architecture." As he stripped off the outer walls, Pendergast would find decorative panelling and huge portraits in stone, along with offerings to the gods which were placed there presumably to guarantee the success of the structure.

Mayans were often seen as religious people who worshipped time through their complex calendars. But Pendergast noted that these people were not very different from modern Canadians who are already gearing up for the celebration of the Millenium, 11 months away. They apparently believed in a benevolent underworld. Caves were considered a pathway to the gods and often contained elaborately carved offerings, as well as human and animal effigies.

Pendergast compared his Mayan sites to the city-states of ancient Greece. Lamanai and Altun Ha were only 40 km. apart but were very different places, ruled by kings and queens who were surrounded by courtiers and a tremendously rich upper class. Since World War II, Mayan archaeologists have looked beyond the giant temples to surrounding areas. They have found real cities with lots of houses and winding streets. But the Mayans didn't need highways or modern city grids because they carried their baggage by hand. They had neither the wheel nor draft animals.

The excavations at Altun Ha uncovered the peak of Mayan society. The rulers were undoubtedly very rich, but goods of considerable quality have been found over a wide area, often in small houses, indicating the society was cosmopolitan.

Common artefacts included extensively decorated ceramic jars, but one of the most beautiful pieces from this era was a two-tone pottery conga drum decorated with a bat motif. Archaeologists have found plenty of mundane kitchen articles, including pottery griddles similar to those that are still used to make tortillas. The pottery motifs show people with their arms crossed over their chests, a sign of subservience, and

elaborate clothes made of skin, feathers and jewellery. The perishable materials disintegrated long ago and little is known about them. The Mayans were obviously skilled craftsmen, as shown by a set of obsidian earrings that were elaborately carved with a skill we cannot match today. One set was decorated with hieroglyphics that say, in effect, "these earrings belong to"

Green jade had a tremendous sacred significance to the Mayans, perhaps because the colour green symbolized the precious commodities of fertility and water. Jade pendants were wonderfully carved into figurines, animals, gods and human effigies. Much of this work was done using wooden-handled tools, now long gone. One pendant was 25 cm long with elaborate carving on the front and hieroglyphics on the back, giving the date, lineage and biography of the owner. Holes were drilled through the middle and the edges, presumably so a high official could strap it to his chest.

The most impressive artefact found by Pendergast was a spherical carving of a head, perhaps a sun god, the size of a bowling ball. It is the most famous of all the Mayan treasures and is so well known that it is pictured on Belizean bank notes.

The Classical Era tailed off in the 9th century AD, when, Pendergast said, "all good things came to an end." There are many theories for the end of that glorious period, but none are generally accepted. The ancient society continued on a lesser scale, on small islands and at Lamanai, where Pendergast has worked since 1974.

This city has survived 3,000 years, past the end of the Mayan Classical Era, through the 11th century. It is still occupied by Mayan descendants today. The art and architecture changed slowly over time and the great temples of the past were replaced by edifices that Pendergast compared to "dental offices." Burial mounds became important sources for the archaeologist because the ancients were often buried together, head to toe, covered in broken pottery. The later pottery is simpler and cruder than before, but of greater variety. It is more experimental and often includes metal bells, rings and buttons imported from mines in Mexico. Bowls often sat on the backs of crouching animals or people.

By the 16th century when the Spaniards arrived, the monuments of old had been reduced to simple villages and small temples. The old habits continued through the Spanish invasion, but the culture of the two continents became increasingly mixed. Christian churches were often integrated with Mayan temples, as were religious artefacts, tools and utilitarian goods.

The Mayan Empire ended long ago, but the people still exist in Guatemala, southern Mexico and Belize, as do many aspects of their language, architecture, habits and culture.

QUESTIONS:

-- Most of the Mayan books were burnt by the Spaniards and few traces remain. But their hieroglyphics have recently been deciphered by a professor in Calgary, who used a dictionary that had been compiled by a Spanish bishop and taken back to Spain where it was forgotten for centuries. Like their ancient Egyptian counterparts, the Mayans used ideograms which had a phonetic value. We still can't read the detailed hieroglyphic texts, but we can often work out their rough meanings, giving an insight into the Mayan mind. This opens a tremendous window on the history of the Mayans.

-- Green jade was often mined locally, in the highlands of Guatemala and Central America. Sometimes, small pieces were drilled and strung together to form a death mask that covered the entombed body.

-- Archaeologists have learned a great deal from modern Mayans. Pendergast was impressed by the way workmen moved a heavy generator on rollers, exactly where it was meant to go, while techniques of house construction bear many similarities to the past.

-- Those wonderful schoolboy tales of virgins being thrown into bottomless pools minus their hearts are probably not true. Children were undoubtedly thrown into pools, but it's a little difficult to tell - after all this time - whether they were living virgins. The remains have intact rib cages, casting doubt on stories that beating hearts were ripped out and offered to the gods.

-- Books on the Mayans tend to be 15 years behind the latest news, but Pendergast recommended *The Ancient Maya* by Robert Shaver, published by Stanford University Press.

-- The health of the ancient Mayans was apparently good for their time perhaps, Pendergast suggested, because they are, and apparently were, among the cleanest people he has known. They had sanitary landfills in ancient times and still keep their houses spotlessly clean.

-- They did, however, have unique ideas on beauty. They exaggerated the size of the nose in statues and they sometimes made their children cross-eyed by setting a bead a few inches in front of their eyes.

Pendergast was thanked by Jennifer Young.

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OBSERVATIONS:

Lumsden has observed four trumpeter swans on the south shore of Lake Erie, near the New York-Pennsylvania border;

McAndrews has already seen two foxes, gambolling in his back yard. Given the season, they were probably mating;

Muller reported word of an early shrew-like mammal near Melbourne, Australia. A jawbone was found, apparently 115 million years old;

Ron Scovell has two fox dens in his backyard with a noisy, busy group of inhabitants;

John Speakman came across a flock of wild turkeys on the Jan. 2 birdcount, near Port Bolster;

Carrick observed a juvenile eagle near the Metro Toronto Zoo.

The meeting adjourned at 10:28 pm.

THE NEXT MEETING:

The next meeting will be held Feb. 16th at 8:00 pm in Room 432 of the Ramsay Wright Zoological Laboratories at the University of Toronto when Harry Lumsden will talk on "Travels in Siberia."