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Jungle festivals led to first Maya cities

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The great Central American jungle civilisation of the Maya is renowned for its stepped pyramids, temples and great urban plazas, where human sacrifice may have been routine. But a surprising story is emerging from detailed examination of archaeological remains. Whatever came later, one of the Maya's oldest known great cities, at Ceibal in Guatemala, began as a multicultural love-in.

The first great pyramid builders of Central America, it turns out, were mostly itinerant hunters and gatherers of no fixed abode, who began meeting for ad hoc ceremonies and rituals in the jungle about 3000 years ago.



Maya remains (Image: Sébastien Homberger)

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The findings overturn conventional archaeological thinking that ancient cities all emerged from prosperous farming communities, and that big religious ceremonial complexes were only built in the most successful cities. In the case of the Maya, it was the other way round. The first builders and worshippers were more new-age hippy festivalgoers than yeoman farmers or urban sophisticates.

Only hundreds of years later did their successors settle, take up full-time farming and build a city to live in. The new finding follows [recent evidence from elsewhere](#) that religious buildings came before agriculture and settlements.

For the past decade, [Takeshi Inomata](#) of the University of Arizona in Tucson has been excavating the Ceibal site on the banks of the Pasión river, which once had some 10,000 inhabitants and covered tens of square kilometres. His latest investigations reveal that the city's residential areas are much more recent than the first ceremonial pyramids and temples.

"The ceremonial complex was the first architecture built at Ceibal," Inomata says. "Durable residences were not built until two to six centuries later."

Early builders

The first builders, in about 950 BC, were itinerant hunters, fishers, foragers and nomadic farmers, who gathered periodically for the construction of ceremonial buildings and community rituals. While at work, they lived in temporary shelters before dispersing again into the forests.

Even 250 years later, when the largest pyramids and temples were completed, only a small elite lived in permanent homes in Ceibal. The rest came and went. Only in about 300 BC did urban living become the norm, with the spread of suburbs full of houses built on permanent platforms. The Maya habit of burying their dead beneath the platforms was also not widespread until 300 BC.

Inomata suggests that the collective activity of building temples and worshipping eventually encouraged integration of the diverse traveller groups and the growth of an urban centre, rather than the other way round.

Since beginning their jungle dig at Ceibal in 2005 – a site first uncovered by Harvard researchers in the 1960s – Inomata and his wife Daniela Triadan have rewritten the history of the Maya people by reconstructing a detailed chronology of the city's development. They have shown that Ceibal was not just the first citadel of the Maya, but probably the earliest of many ceremonial complexes built in the Central American jungles over the past three millennia.

Archaeologists once thought that the Maya learned their architectural skills from the Olmec people in present-day Mexico. But [two years ago](#), Inomata and Triadan reported that the first ceremonial complexes of Ceibal were built 200 years before La Venta, the capital of the Olmec people 400 kilometres to the north-west.

Weighing the evidence

Some researchers will take more persuading that Ceibal was built by nomads. [Elizabeth Graham](#) of University College London says that permanent wood-built structures may have predated the masonry uncovered by Inomata's team but failed to survive the ravages of nature. "We have to be careful not to fall into the trap of linking sedentism to masonry construction," she says. "But I especially like the idea that collaborative construction played an important role in social integration."

At the height of the Maya civilisation, society was strongly hierarchical. It is thought that there were brutal religious rituals run by priest-kings, with human sacrifices, bloodletting and self-mutilation aimed at placating their gods. However, the extent of those is [still debated](#).

But the story now emerging is that Ceibal was very different in the early days, says Melissa Burham, a co-author of the new study. "Different peoples with diverse ways of life coexisted in apparent harmony for generations before establishing a uniform society." Before the steps of the pyramids dripped with the blood of human sacrifice, she says, Ceibal began as "an ancient cultural melting pot".

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Festival city

An ancient collection of diverse hunter-gatherers came together to build religious festival sites that may have been the origin of big Maya cities

