

**Rethinking Cochuah Archaeological History:  
Indigenous Politics, Foreign Researchers, and International Economies**

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This presentation uses the history of archaeology in the Cochuah region of Quintana Roo, Mexico to explore the conference's theme of "Inclusion, Collaboration and Engagement." The region is best known as the center of Chan Santa Cruz, the independent Maya state established by the Caste War. As such, the region is better known to cultural anthropologists than archaeologists. During the 2001 field season, we joined the Cochuah Regional Archaeological Survey (then named Proyecto Arqueológico Yo'okop) to document sculpture and inscriptions. Subsequently we researched the history of archaeology in Cochuah. Our approach builds upon traditional histories of methodology, theory, and biography to show that this region includes many voices: Maya politicians, chicle harvesters, transnational businessmen, common Americans, and foreign intellectuals. While the region was briefly visited several times during the 20<sup>th</sup> century by archaeologists, it is only within the past 10 years that large multi-year projects have begun. This dearth of scholarship may seem the inevitable consequence of the regional conflict, but it is also a result of a complex debate amongst diverse audiences. Rather than passively enabling research, we show that the indigenous people self-awarely negotiated with archaeologists. We show that collaboration between archaeologists and indigenous leaders occurred as early as the 1920s. And we show that the engagement in the local community by a medical missionary led to creditable results in archaeological documentation. Ultimately we use Cochuah as an anchor to show both the potential strengths and the frustrations of the issues forefronted in this year's conference.

Hello everyone, we are pleased to speak to you today about how our research in the Cochuah region of Mexico fits into the conference theme of “Inclusion, Collaboration and Engagement.” Since 2001 we have been members of the Cochuah Regional Archaeological Survey. Initially our contribution was to document and interpret the sculpture and inscriptions at the Maya site Yo’okop, located in the center of this region. Our most recent involvement, however, concerns the history of archeology there. We believe that this history of archaeology in Cochuah is illuminating to consider in light of inclusiveness and collaboration because this is an area where indigenous people have been proactively involved in how their story is told and how their past is researched. Collaboration has been present over the entire 82 years since the site was first documented, with varying degrees of success and failure. In recent years many of us have begun to work collaboratively, and as such we may benefit from the story of researchers in Cochuah.

To reconstruct this history of collaboration we have taken a multifaceted approach. While part of the story can be gleaned from the published scholarship, to understand the broader picture required gleaning information from 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Maya manifestos and letters; archaeologists’ diaries and letters; obituaries; colonial-era documents; institutional archives of US universities and organizations; and the popular press. The result is this case study of one area, emphasizing work at its largest site, Yo’okop

As a straw man, let us consider what a traditional history of Cochuah archaeology would look like before taking the inclusive approach seriously. To make our discussion clearer we will contrast the history of Cochuah with that at Palenque. Scholarship at

Palenque is well documented from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Proto-archaeology began there in 1784, when Antonio del Rio wrote a heavily illustrated governmental report. By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the site was photographed by the French explorer Desire Charnay, whose account was celebrated by the intellectuals of Europe. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Palenque had become well-known to the general public. During the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Tulane funded Frans Blom to map it. At mid-century Tombs were excavated, tourism began, and a museum was built to celebrate the findings.

But none of this sort of thing happened in Cochuah. No exploration of the archaeological sites occurred there in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century only a handful of exploratory parties entered Cochuah. In each case the effort was brief and the results were a handful of anecdotes. To this day there is no book dedicated to archaeology in the Cochuah region. Publications are limited to field reports and articles. Indeed, if we look at this map of archaeological sites in the Maya region created in 2000 the Cochuah region appears as a void. Yo'okop appears as an island in an empty sea.

Despite this dearth of study, we now know that the Cochuah region was once a thriving region with sites as impressive as any region in Mesoamerica. This understanding comes from the Cochuah Regional Archaeological Survey led by Justine Shaw and Dave Johnstone, which is a long-term project now in the process of mapping and striving to recover its economic and environmental history. They have shown that Yo'okop, for example, was a thriving metropolis that boasted grand architecture. Indeed, the tallest pyramid at Yo'okop is only two meters shorter than the Castillo at Chichén Itzá. And Yo'okop was only one of many ancient cities. It is probable that a population of hundreds of thousands of people filled the region.

To account for the absence of archaeological projects there we needed to think about the history of scholarship with a large cast of characters, and the image of Desire Charnay can help us to understand why. This is the frontispiece to his *Ancient Cities and Ruins of the New World* published in 1863, in which he shows himself as a fearless adventurer—a man of unstoppable drive in pursuit of a higher scientific agenda. His chest is bared, showing beautifully toned muscle, and the tools of his adventure dangle from his belt. This portrait seems outmoded and comical today because of the grandiose self-presentation. But the image reveals assumptions that remain central to virtually every traditional history of Maya archaeology. These histories have focused on detailed accounts of the personal identities, institutions, and ideas of Western-trained scholars. Their readers perceive the archaeologist as the vanguard of progressive knowledge and exemplar of personal heroism. Even so, the best such books are incredibly insightful.

But what would happen if we focus instead on the second figure in Charnay's frontispiece? What is Charnay telling us about the indigenous laborer who carries Charnay's supplies? To focus on the indigenous laborer required us to acknowledge that archaeology can be a cultural and geographic battleground. In Cochuah the Mayas were far from the uncomprehending laborers that Charnay assumed. They have fully understood the purposes and goals of archaeology. They have also astutely evaluated its benefit to themselves and have been powerful forces in determining that archaeology is a pursuit to be either rejected altogether or intermeshed with their own agendas.

Our work with the Yo'okop Project demonstrated that in the pre-conquest period Cochuah was on the frontier between warring kingdoms from at least 350 AD through the Spanish conquest. During the conquest, Cochuah became feared by the Spanish for its

militancy. Even after conquest, Coahuah was almost impossible to control and the region became a refuge for Mayas who fled from Spanish and Creole overlords. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Coahuah became the center of the Caste War. This rural peasant uprising, sometimes called the forgotten revolution of 1848, was initially inspired by the ideals of liberty, equality, and justice. It lasted for over 50 years, and it could even be argued that this war continues in stalemated form today.

We were aware of the history of the Caste War but were nonetheless startled by the visual evidence that surrounded us when we arrived in Coahuah. Our base was in the town of Saban, where the largest building is a roofless colonial-era church that was burned during the attack that the rebel Mayas made on the Creole population. Our drive to Yo'okop was along a rutted road built in 1901 by the Mexican general Ignacio Bravo in his brutal campaign to subdue the rebel Mayas. Along the side of the road was a partially cleared space where Fort Yo'okop once stood. At first blush the Caste War may seem distinct from the scholarly history of archaeology, but its players framed the power dynamics that enabled and hindered research.

These players included, not only the Maya themselves, but also economic leaders in the international chewing gum industry. Chicle, as you know, is an Aztec word meaning “sticky stuff” and the Spanish word for chewing gum. Chicle is also the name of the natural chewing gum base extracted from sapodilla trees. It was introduced to North America by Santa Anna, the Mexican general who became President of Mexico for 11 non-consecutive terms. During exile he met Thomas Adams, an inventor. They strove to reap a fortune by turning chicle into rubber, but failed. Then Adams accidentally popped chicle into his mouth. He realized the potential for chewing gum, and the

resulting product was an instant success. And one of the primary sources for chicle was the Cochuah region.

For decades chicle provided the revenue by which the rebel Mayas armed themselves and maintained their independence. Chicleros gathered the resin and brought it to the coast where it was traded for weapons and cash. But the monopoly ended when US companies developed chicle plantations elsewhere in the Americas. As revenues in Cochuah declined, so did Maya access to guns, munitions, and other supplies. In 1901 the Caste War officially ended when the Mexican army again attacked the rebel Mayas. The rebel army was virtually without weapons. And by the end of the campaign by some reports 95% of the Mayas in the region had died. 5,000 people remained out of the former population of 100,000. Officially Cochuah became part of Mexico, but the surviving Mayas remained hostile to outsiders.

It was in this now desolate land of Cochuah that the scant archaeology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began. The first archeological expedition entered the Cochuah region in 1926. It was a joint effort of the *New York Times* journalist Gregory Mason and the archaeologist Herbert Spinden. In order to enter Cochuah territory they received the permission of Francesco May, the paramount leader of the remaining rebel Mayas.

In their publications, Mason and Spinden described themselves as independent explorers and discoverers, but they had been guided at all times by indigenous chicle harvesters who knew the location of the archaeological sites. And the guides were leading them on a route that was carefully chosen by Francisco May. What Mason and Spinden failed to realize was that they were engaged in a struggle over the control of indigenous identity. The chicleros showcased a few ruins, but they denied Mason and Spinden access

to ancient sites that were the locations of sacred cross shrines erected during the Caste War. So why did Francisco May permit Mason and Spinden to enter the Cochuah region at all? To understand the answer, we must return to chewing gum.

During the 1920s the chicle economy was thriving but on the brink of crisis. Inventors had been experimenting with synthetic gum for decades, and the first bubble gum was invented in 1906. Luckily for the Mayas it was too sticky, and when it popped on a chewer's face it required turpentine to remove. Nonetheless, astute chicle traders—such as Francisco May—knew that it was only a matter of time before successful synthetic alternatives were developed. And indeed a successful synthetic gum was invented in 1928—Double Bubble. Today all chewing gum purchased in North America today outside of specialty stores is synthetic.

Faced with the collapse of the chicle economy the solution was tourist archaeology. Tourism was being promoted in the early 1920's by the Yucatecan politician Felipe Carrillo Puerto, who presented himself as the descendant of Maya kings. Like Carrillo Puerto, Francisco May described himself and the rebel Mayas as the descendants of the temple builders of Cochuah.

This concept that the ancient temple builders and the contemporary Mayas represented a continuum was evidently foreign to the Mayas themselves. At the time that Carrillo Puerto and Francisco May were speaking to their audiences the Mayas identified themselves as Indians and farmers, but considered the ancient cities to be the remains of a long-lost culture. It was Western-trained archaeologists who developed and promoted the concept of Maya identity as a long, continuous, and distinctive cultural tradition stretching deep into the past. Francisco May, in welcoming Mason and Spinden to see the

supposed temples of his ancestors, was exploiting that Western concept of Maya identity to the economic advantage of Cochuah.

Thus, when we consider the history of archaeology in the Cochuah region from multiple perspectives, what becomes apparent is a complicated nexus of interests that raises difficult questions. To what extent should those of us who are foreign scholars impose our research questions on our subjects? To what extent should indigenous people shape the study of their own past? And how do we respond when the self-perception of local people conflicts with the scholarly understanding? To what extent should scholarship be subordinate to the whims of the players in a transnational corporate economy? And ultimately how can we honestly present our research, which by necessity emerges enmeshed within these multiple agendas? In the case of the Cochuah region, research stagnated for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as scholars struggled to work in one of the most tension-filled regions of the world. The few advances that were made were the result of close collaboration with the indigenous people—whether they be Francisco May during the 1920s or the leaders of Dzoyola that invited a medical missionary and amateur archaeologist to their village during the 1970s. By fortunate circumstances archaeology is now progressing in the region at a faster pace. But ultimately those of us who work here remain keenly aware of the pressures and politics from the past that continue to haunt the present day, and we ponder how knowledge may progress in the future as we muddle forward ourselves. Thank you.

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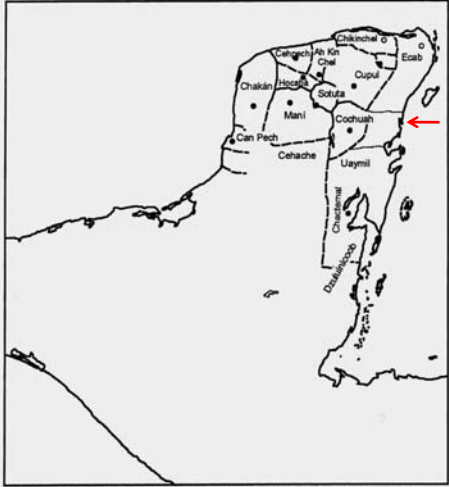
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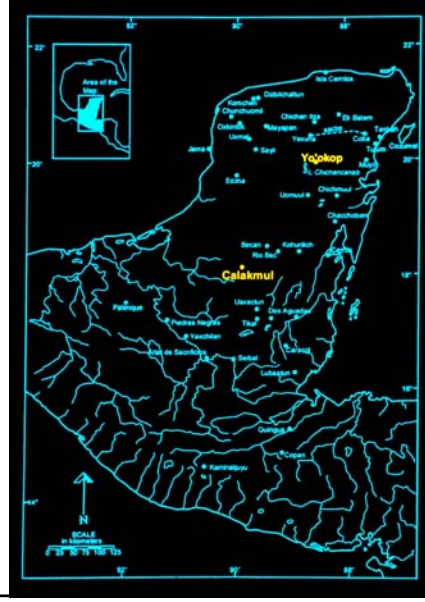
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The Cochuah Region  
After Roys



\* Redrawn from Roys (1957), Gerhard (1991) and Quezada 2001. Locations are approximate.

Yo'okop  
After Shaw and Johnstone



Inscription at Yo'okop  
Photograph by Wren and Nygard



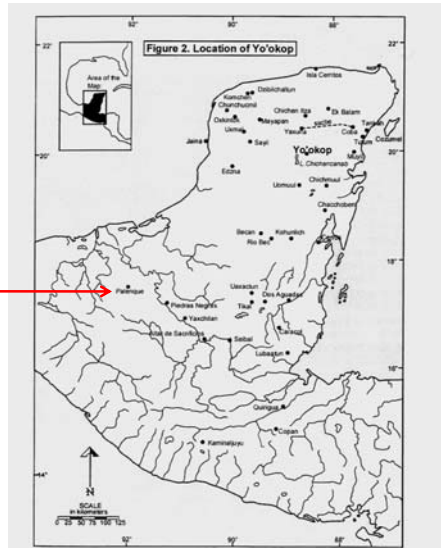
\* Redrawn from Roys (1957), Gerhard (1991) and Quezada 2001. Locations are approximate.



Palenque



Map of Yo'okop  
Shaw and Johnstone



Antonio del Rio  
18<sup>th</sup> Century



Desire Charnay  
19<sup>th</sup> Century



Frans Blom  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century



Tomb of Pacal, Palenque  
1950s Excavation

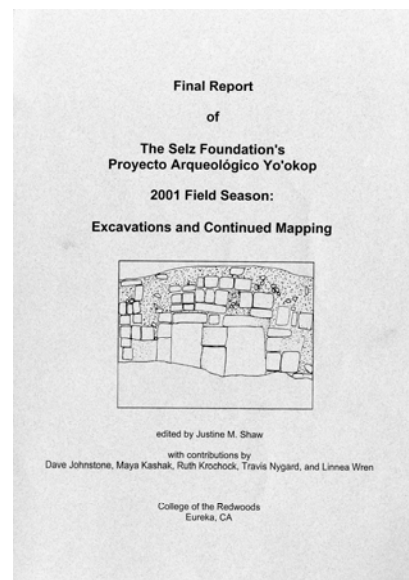


Cochuah:  
Nothing Happens

Map of Archaeological Sites in the Cochuah Region  
After Grube



Current Researchers in Cochuah  
Directed by Justine Shaw and Dave  
Johnstone



Pyramid at Yo'okop  
Photograph by Wren and Nygard



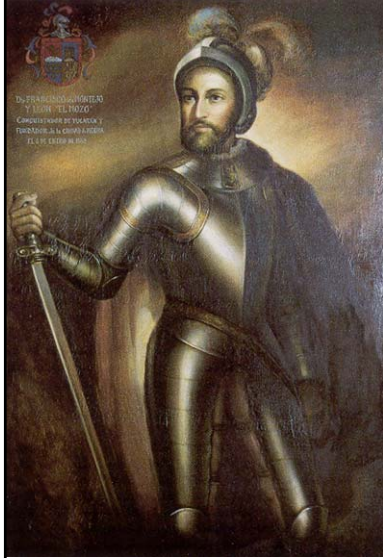
Pyramid at Chichen Itza



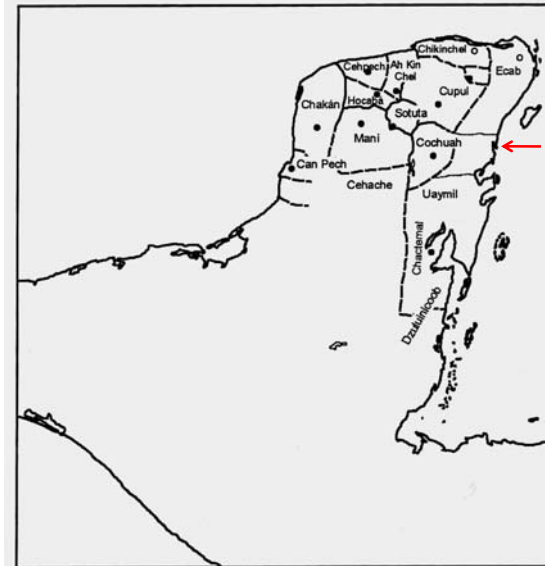
Desire Charnay  
19<sup>th</sup> Century



Conquistador  
Francisco de Montejo



Map of Cochuah Region



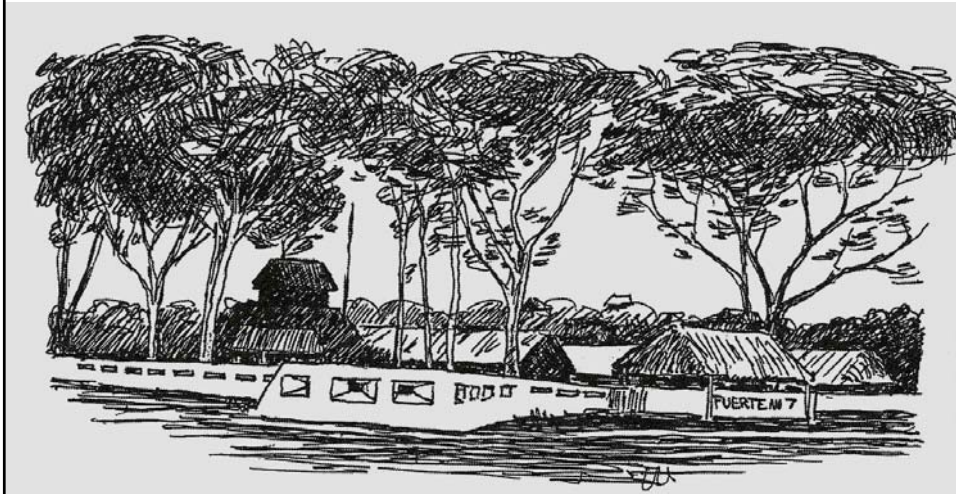
\* Redrawn from Roys (1957), Gerhard (1991) and Quezada 2001. Locations are approximate.



Roofless Colonial Church in Saban, Mexico.  
Photographs by Shaw and Johnstone



Fort Yo'okop  
Drawing from Reed



Chicle Harvesting



Santa Anna and Thomas Adams



Gregory Mason

Photographs from Mason, *Silver Cities of Yucatan*

Herbert Spinden



Bubble Gum



First *Successful* Bubble Gum



Tourism at Chichen Itza

