



The Ahau Chronicles



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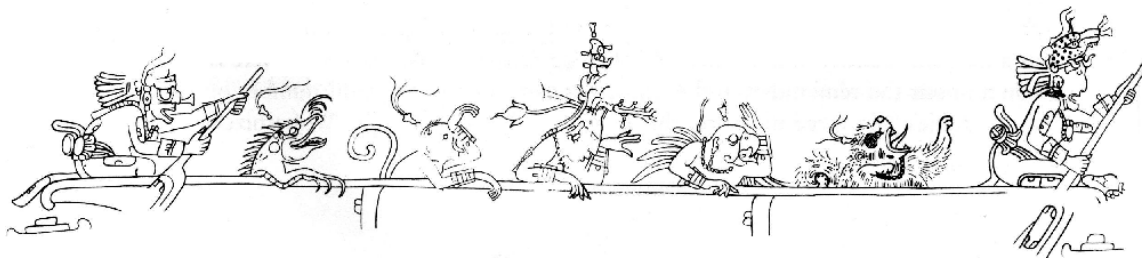


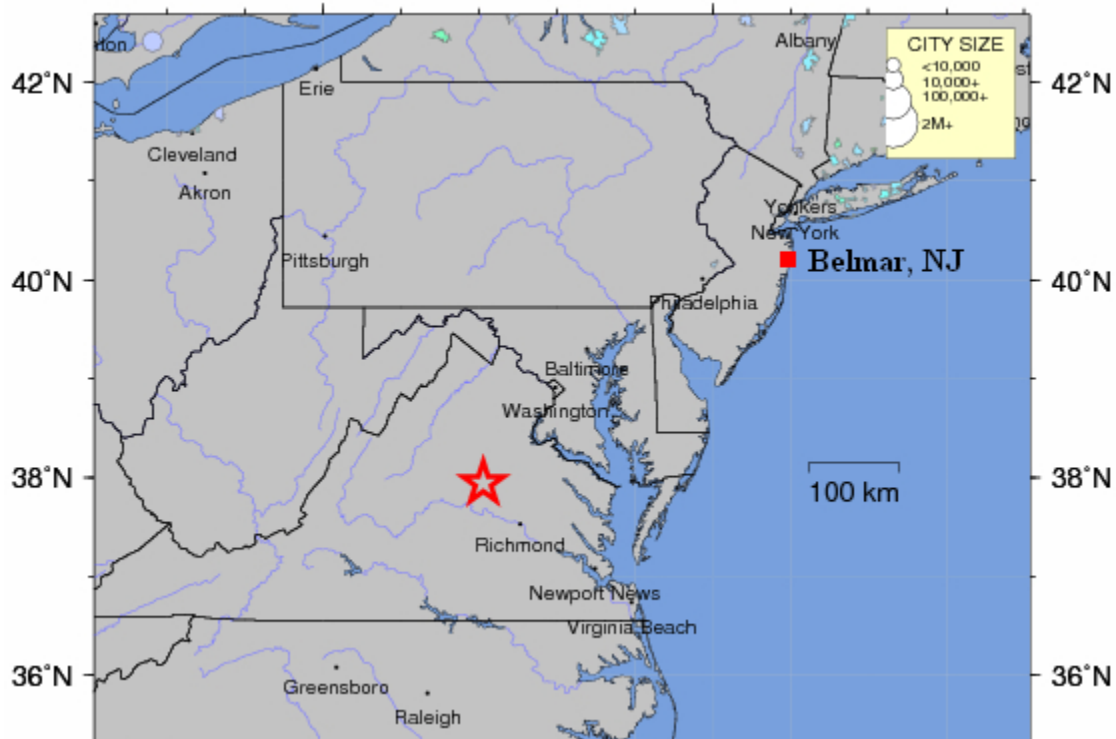
Disasters

As the current year continues its inevitable march forward and 2012 begins to loom large on the horizon, some people may begin to feel a free-floating fear of the unknown and a good deal of anxiety for what the future may bring. Normally I try to calm these fears for it is my long-standing belief, derived from the information I have learned through my research regarding the end of the Mayan Calendar, that the coming year will be one of enlightenment and hope. But every now and then the power of the natural world will forcefully interject into our daily routines and remind us that, believe what we will, we are all at the mercy of Mother Nature.

The past week was marked by not one but two incredible demonstrations of the power inherent in the physical world which we inhabit. On Tuesday, August 23, a Magnitude 5.8 earthquake occurred near the surface of the earth, 39 miles northwest of Richmond, the capital of Virginia. The quake occurred far from the edge of any tectonic plate and sent shock waves through bedrock that were felt more than 300 miles away in New York City. As skyscrapers swayed people streamed into the streets in panic, fearing that a much more sinister event was underway.

Less than 5 days later Hurricane Irene, shown above, made landfall on the Eastern Seaboard of the US and pummeled 1,000 miles of coastline with gale force winds and torrential rains. As a witness to both these events, I couldn't help be preoccupied with the theme of disasters and how they are able to permanently change the people and cultures upon which they inflict themselves.



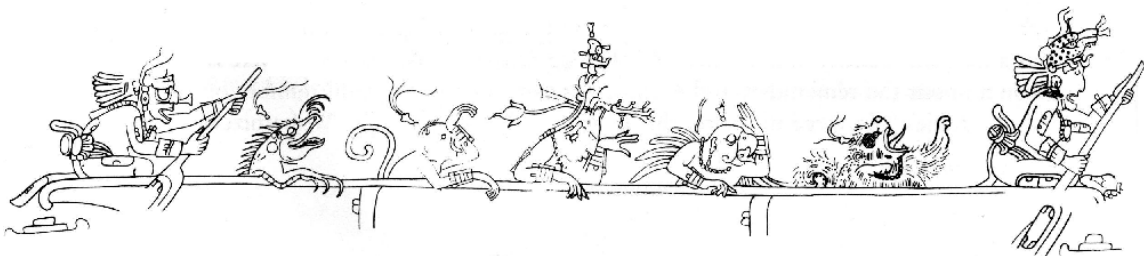


Tuesday, August 23, 2011 at 01:51:04 PM at epicenter

After a busy summer of near-constant work it was decided to take a short three-day vacation to the beach in Belmar, New Jersey, at the northern end of what is now infamously known as the “Jersey Shore.” We arrived at midday Monday and spent the entire day Tuesday on the beach enjoying beautiful clear skies and mild surf, the calm before the storm of Hurricane Irene. Shortly before 2pm, I felt a gentle rocking of my beach chair and suspected that someone had brushed by behind me and knocked into my chair. After looking around and seeing no one nearby I quickly realized that the movement was coming from the ground itself. As I sat deathly still in anticipation, a second tremor shook again and I had experienced my first ever earthquake.

Having conducted much research for previous earthquakes in Haiti, Chile and Japan I was familiar with the United States Geological Survey (USGS) website and so I quickly grabbed my Blackberry and learned the details of the tremor that had happened only minutes before. After sending out some emails to my nearest and dearest (and assuring them there was no threat of a tsunami!), I learned that my mother had felt the quake north of the border beyond Niagara Falls, Canada.

Subsequent research into the Virginia quake caused me some additional alarm since, as the USGS website explains: “It is difficult to determine if a known fault is still active and could slip and cause an earthquake. As in most other areas east of the Rockies, the best guide to earthquake hazards in the seismic zone is the earthquakes themselves.”



While there was no significant damage from the earthquake, the same cannot be said for the destruction wrought by Hurricane Irene. In the days before the storm made landfall some senior meteorologists were describing it as one of the worst-case scenarios for a storm track, given the high density of population and the potential for massive property damage that existed along the east coast of the US.



Although Irene was merely a Category 1 hurricane, the lowest possible ranking on a 1-to-5 scale, the size of the storm made it a particularly dangerous threat. Sustained winds of up to 90 miles per hour radiated outwards from the hurricane center to create a storm more than 500 miles in diameter, twice as large as a normal hurricane. Some areas received more than 15 inches of rain, causing erosion and mudslides that uprooted trees from the soggy ground. Nearly 10 million people were left without electricity in the wake of the storm and, as of the publication of this newsletter three days later, many people, including some in my neighborhood, have yet to have their power restored. Roads and bridges have washed out making travel difficult and it is still far too early to claim that life has returned to normal.

But what if this is the new normal? Scientists have been predicting for years that we are beginning to see the impacts of global warming, from melting glaciers to extended droughts to storm events of a frequency and intensity unknown in the past. The Japanese nuclear crisis still persists almost 6 months after the tsunami with much of Europe questioning the safety of nuclear power. Perhaps we are entering a phase of history where further growth will be impeded by a combination of natural and political forces which we ourselves have thrown out of balance.

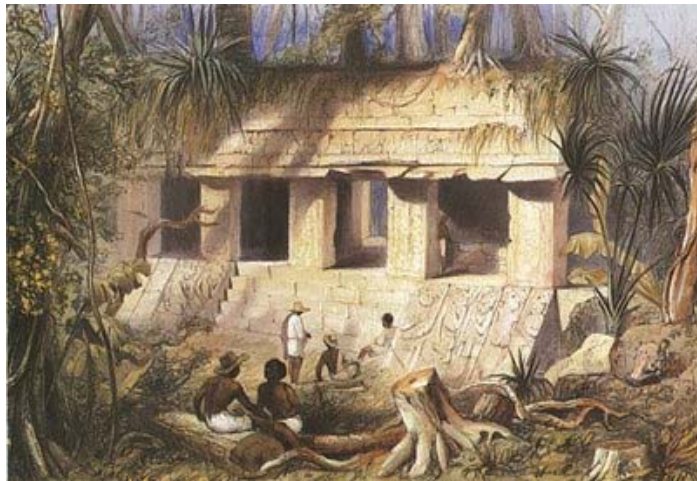


With the prospect of cultural decline on my mind I was stirred to think about a new yet seemingly obvious hypothesis that I have recently developed regarding the mysterious decline and near-disappearance of the Classic Maya culture which began in the 8th Century following the reign of Chan Bahlum at Palenque. The new idea posits that perhaps it was Chan Bahlum himself, after journeying to the Old World, who inadvertently introduced viral plagues that decimated the native populations, much as they did centuries later in the years following the arrival of Europeans in the New World.

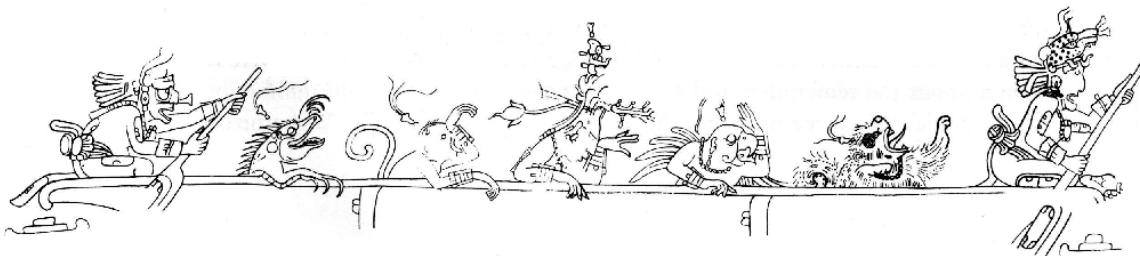


In Charles Mann's "**1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus**," Mann explains that Native populations before Columbus were likely far in excess of even our highest estimates and that the diseases themselves travelled ahead of the early explorers, killing natives who would never set eyes on the white man. When later settlers arrived, they discovered a land sparsely populated by small bands, mere shadows of the great tribes from which they had descended.

If Chan Bahlum unwittingly introduced similar deadly diseases almost eight centuries earlier, the devastation may have been equally catastrophic. The great city-states would have begun to crumble and the society would have collapsed from within. Unchecked, the jungles overran the temples.



While my estimation of Chan Bahlum's sophistication suggests that he should not have been so ignorant as to engender an epidemic that brought down his entire culture, the timing of his apparent world travels with the subsequent rapid decline of the Classic Maya period certainly gives one pause for reflection. Though Chan Bahlum may have "discovered" the Old World, it would have been a world of death and disease to which no one, having witnessed its effects, would have desired to return.



The first of my travel journals has been uploaded to www.chichibel.com and details my thoughts in the early months of 1996 after I returned to Palenque at the end of 1995. I was staying at a rustic campsite within the old city limits of Palenque and continued the explorations there I had begun the year before. Some of the writing is difficult to read since the high humidity of the rainforest caused the ink to bleed and the pages to mildew. Even today I am struck by the prophetic foreshadowing of this journal.

I had come back to Palenque to conduct research for a quasi-fictional book about the dynastic history of Chan Bahlum's bloodline, though my thoughts are freeform and cover many aspects of book making, of which I had no previous experience. I felt that if I communed with the intricate inscriptions left for posterity I might glimpse some insight into the life of one of the greatest poet-kings the world had ever known. Approaching the primary text set within its original context deep in the jungle allowed me to hew close to its authentic intentions.

After visiting the site of Bonampak and being rebuffed by the great epigrapher Stephen Houston for offering up a poor copy of the Temple of the Cross Inscription for him to read, I commissioned a local sculptor to carve for me stone copies of the Temple of the Sun and Temple of the Foliated Cross Inscription. [Warning: stone tablets and backpacking do not mix!] To gauge the artists's accuracy I cross-checked the copy of the Temple of the Sun Inscription with the original in the temple. I still use these tablets today.

The first four full moons of 1996 I witnessed from Palenque. Prior to the third full moon I met Francisca, a Chilean pixie and recent art school graduate, whose boundless energy and easy beauty captivated my heart. We traveled to the continental divide at San Cristobal de las Casas, to the Pacific coast at Zipolite and Puerto Escondido, to Mexico City and Teotihuacan for the March equinox, and to Chichen Itza for a view of the solar serpent before returning to Palenque for the fourth full moon. Imagine my surprise when I learned that it was to be a Total Lunar Eclipse!

In the last pages of this journal is a line drawing of the Chilean flag against a stylized Andes mountains which Fran sketched in my open journal. On this same page I wrote for the first time the syllables of "chi-chi-be," the name I would give the monument I was to eventually discover off the coast of Chile. The syllables relate to the sound known in music circles as "chica-chica-boom" and were an attempt to express the intense feeling of well-being that I was experiencing. After I returned home to Canada, Fran flew to Toronto where we spent a month together, failing to rekindle the energy we experienced in Mexico. With our relationship on the rocks, I accompanied her to the airport for her return flight. As she drifted into the controlled zone of the airport where I could no longer follow, she turned and said with the sweetest voice: "Come to Chile."

