

# Apocalypse **Not Now**

## Maya Mural Rewrites the Ending

By Amy Laskowski

Night had fallen over the dense jungle surrounding the ancient city of Xultún, Guatemala, and Franco Rossi and Aviva Cormier were kneeling in a deep tunnel, brushing dirt from an ancient ceramic vessel within what could be a tomb that had been found beneath the floor of a Maya ruin.

Rossi (GRS'15) used a fine brush to gently remove dirt from the tombstone's surface so they could eventually lift it, while Cormier (GRS'16) carried the dirt out of the narrow trench. That was when Rossi noticed it—a small fragment of a human skull beneath his brush.

"It was truly amazing," he says. "Not only to uncover the ancient remains within this tomb, but to actually find what you had hoped would be there all along."

In all, the excavation by a team of archaeologists led by William Saturno, a College of Arts & Sciences

assistant professor of archaeology, revealed the skeletal remains of six people who researchers believe lived during the Classic period of ancient Maya civilization, between 250 and 950 AD. More important, members of the team suspect that the remains are linked to figures depicted in a mural just a few feet away. Saturno found that mural two years ago, along with a strange and unique series of calendric calculations, in what he believes was the workplace of a Maya scribe. Those findings were published last spring in *Science* and *National Geographic*.

"We have this bizarre little room with notations in it, and we believe it's part

of a residential complex," says Saturno, director of the BU Study Abroad Guatemala Archaeology Program. "We're looking at Maya scholars and scribes as they figured out their place in the universe. We can look at the history of science in the New World in a way that we couldn't before. I feel like I can get into the head of these incredible scholars and ancient society."

Saturno is famous among Central American archaeologists as the lucky finder of 2 of the 10 to 15 Maya murals known to exist. In March 2010, he led a team of BU archaeologists to Xultún, one of the largest and least explored of Maya centers. The six-square-

mile area is believed to have been home at one time to tens of thousands of people. Maxwell Chamberlain (CAS'11,'12), one of Saturno's Study Abroad students, wandered on a lunch break into a tunnel dug by looters, where he found a red line on a stucco wall, so faint he could barely make it out. It was the edge of a large mural that may depict the people whose remains were found by Rossi.

"If you look at the figures in the mural," says Rossi, "almost everyone is wearing two pendants—one in their headdress, one in their necklace. The person whose remains were recently unearthed is also wearing these two ceramic



A dwelling built by the ancient Maya is located at the edge of the site of Xultún in Guatemala. The house contains the rendering of an ancient figure, possibly the town scribe.





William Saturno uncovers art and writings left by the Maya some 1,200 years ago.



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pendants, and one has a hole in it like it would have been on a necklace. That's why the find is a really big deal. We may actually have found one of the mural's creators."

The focus of the dig is a room roughly the size of a walk-in closet. The north wall is decorated with a mural with a seated king holding a scepter and wearing blue feathers. The west wall is dominated by three black human figures and millimeter-thick black and red glyphs. The east wall has a seated figure painted in black, but also several mysterious hieroglyphic texts.

These glyphs, which are unlike any at other Maya sites, appear to represent

the various calendric cycles charted by the Maya—the 260-day ceremonial calendar, the 365-day solar calendar, the 177-day (or 178-day) lunar semester, the 584-day cycle of Venus, and the 780-day cycle of Mars.


Saturno has since pioneered a way to jigger a flatbed scanner to take 8½-by-11-inch pictures of the walls. On the fourth floor of CAS, his students can see things that weren't visible back in Xultún.

"We were only able to identify some of the astronomical tables through the scan," Saturno says. "Much of the paint wasn't in a condition that we could identify it. Only through examining and processing

the scans, and changing the red writing to black, did we see more numbers."

Saturno and Rossi are persuaded that the calculations put an end to the "doomsday myth"—the belief that the Maya predicted the world would end in 2012.

"People love world-ending scenarios," says Rossi, who, along with Cormier, continues to work on the human remains. "After this one, there's going to be another one. It's just what people do."

 **WEB EXTRA** Watch a video about the Maya mural uncovered by a BU team at [bu.edu/bostonia](http://bu.edu/bostonia).