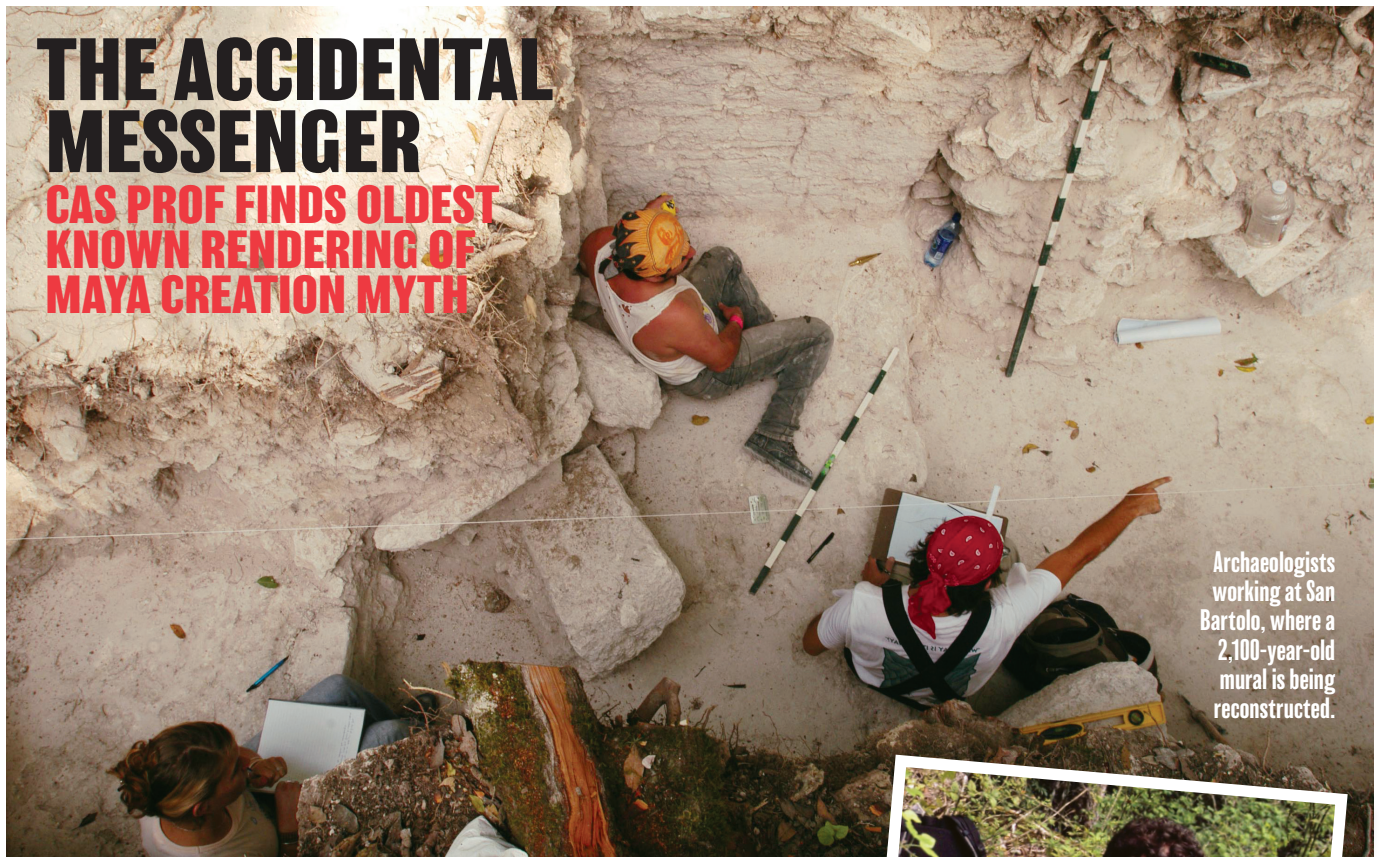


THE ACCIDENTAL MESSENGER

CAS PROF FINDS OLDEST KNOWN RENDERING OF MAYA CREATION MYTH



Archaeologists working at San Bartolo, where a 2,100-year-old mural is being reconstructed.

ON A SWELTERING afternoon in March 2001, archaeologist William Saturno was trekking through the remote jungle of northeast Guatemala, searching for some recently uncovered ancient Maya stelae. Out of water and low on food, Saturno sent his guides to find water, then stumbled alone upon a narrow tunnel dug by looters in the side of a hill. Eager to escape the heat, he crawled into the cool dark space and flashed his headlamp at the tunnel wall. The light played over a colorful ancient Maya mural depicting five deities standing beneath the sacred trees of the ancient Maya cosmology, bringing order to the world through sacrifices of animals, flowers, and their own blood. The mural, Saturno would later determine, was 2,100 years old, the oldest known rendering of the Maya creation myth.

Saturno, a new College of Arts and Sciences assistant professor of archaeology, recalls his first thought: "I've

just made the discovery of a lifetime." His second: "I'll never make it out of here alive."

His discovery, now part of a major archaeological excavation known as San Bartolo, also shows the crowning of the Maya corn god after his death and rebirth. A similar scene appears in a Maya manuscript called the Dresden Codex, dating from the thirteenth century, and in the sixteenth-century Popol Vuh text. The fact that the San Bartolo mural predates these classic works by more than 1,000 years is significant for both scholarship and the modern Maya, who still hold sacred this story of creation.

"It's like finding a Bible written during the time of Christ," says Saturno. "It's that kind of object in their worldview."

Indeed, last year a group of shamans from a modern Maya community in the jungle highlands made the daylong overland journey to San Bartolo to visit the mural, conduct ceremonies honoring the



Archaeologist William Saturno is regarded by modern Maya as a character in the Maya creation myth. He is the deliverer of the oldest rendering of the myth.

ancients, and ask Saturno a lot of questions.

"The idea that a foreigner finds this creation story, preserves it, and brings it back to the known world meant that a lot of their questions had more to do with me than with the mural itself," says Saturno. "They told me as they left that they would try to tease out what my role in all of this was, but clearly I had been chosen to bring this mural to them."

The tunnel where Saturno



found the mural turned out to be a chamber in the base of a pyramid that was part of an ancient Maya city. Two of the chamber's four walls were found intact, but the other two were destroyed in antiquity, and pieces of the mural remain hidden in the rubble. Saturno is now leading an ongoing excavation to piece together the destroyed portions of the wall and to put the entire mural in context.

"How did this mural fit within the San Bartolo site?" he asks. "How did the San Bartolo site fit within Maya culture in the first century B.C.?"

This spring, a group of BU students will get a chance to help Saturno answer those questions, as part of a semester abroad in the new Guatemala Archaeology Program. **CHRIS BERDIK**

A figure (top photo) in the San Bartolo mural offers a blood sacrifice to the Maya corn god. The site is in a remote jungle of northeast Guatemala.

*** web extra**

William Saturno narrates a slide show of his work in Guatemala at www.bu.edu/bostonia.