

**BOSTON
UNIVERSITY**

**ASTROPHYSICS
SEMINAR SERIES**

**"Keeping Time with the Cosmos:
The Role of Astronomy in 8th Century Maya Society"**



Bill Saturno
Boston University
Department of Archeology

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Talk begins at 4:00pm in CAS 522

Abstract:

Much has been made this year of the approaching “end-date” of the Maya calendar and its implications for our own society’s future. Keeping track of the passage of time was very important to the ancient Maya and as a result they developed a complex series of calendars to assist them in that endeavor. Here I examine the Maya calendar and present aspects of both the mythology and astronomy at the root of its complex cycles. Though the Maya have long been noted for their accomplishments in mathematics and their astronomical proficiency, most of what we know about their astronomy, and the precision of their understanding of the movement of the sun, moon, and planets, comes from studies of painted bark paper documents dated to only a century or two before Spanish contact. Here I present a source several centuries earlier, a Classic Period wall painting accompanied by numerical tables that appear to have functioned much like those found in astronomical tables from around the time of contact. These represent the earliest such tables yet found but more importantly give us our first look at the scholarly practices that were part of the foundation of royal power.