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Excavation by UNH Archaeologist Featured in National Geographic

Contact: [Erika Mantz](#)
603-862-1567
UNH Media Relations

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Editors: Electronic images are available from Christopher Pollock, picture editor, National Geographic Communications, at 202-857-7760 or cpollock@ngs.org. William Saturno, assistant professor of anthropology, is available for interviews.

DURHAM, N.H. -- The excavation and preservation of what is being called the “Sistine Chapel” of the pre-Classic Maya world by University of New Hampshire archaeologist William Saturno is documented in the December issue of *National Geographic*.



Maya mural found in Guatemala

Two years after Saturno first uncovered a slice of the oldest known intact wall painting of Maya mythology while seeking refuge from the hot sun in the jungle of San Bartolo, Guatemala, he returned last spring and continued to chip away at the rubble packed around the red and yellow mural that portrays the most elaborate depiction of Maya origins ever discovered. It is the first known portrayal of the corn God's journey from the underworld to Earth, and it completely reshapes how researchers look at later mythology.

“Imagine you didn't know the Sistine Chapel existed or that the stories of Christianity extended back that long ago” Saturno says, “and then one day you poke through the roof and see the finger of God touching the finger of Adam. What we've found is the Sistine Chapel of the pre-Classic Maya world.”

The mural is 2,000 years old, hundreds of years older than what anyone thought existed. “We're seeing things that are not supposed to be around,” says Saturno, including the earliest printed inscription, one so old that no one knows how to read it. And what's even more amazing, he says, is that this is all being discovered in an area he describes as small and insignificant. “This was never an important place in the grand scheme of things. It's obvious that there was a long and developed history in place before this was painted.”

Saturno, assistant professor of anthropology at UNH, spends close to half of every year in Guatemala, some in the tunnel originally dug by looters, working over his head in a space so

tight there is no room for him to wear a protective helmet and the rest in a lab, analyzing broken pieces of the mural. The mural is in a small building that was added on to the back of a pyramid, Saturno says. What the building was used for remains an unanswered question.

Loosening 100-pound rocks with a small pick the size of a hammer, he has uncovered the entire north wall, about three feet on the west wall and three of the four corners. He believes the mural ran around all four walls totaling nearly 90 feet, and although some sections were destroyed to build a second pyramid over the original structure, Saturno says he hopes to piece the entire mural together over the next five years.

“I’m itching to go back,” he confesses. “I think about it every day. For every question I answer there are five more, and our trip back in January can’t come soon enough.”