

IN MEMORIAM T. PATRICK CULBERT, 1930–2013

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T. (Thomas) Patrick Culbert was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on June 13, 1930. He attended the University of Minnesota, graduating in 1951 with a major in chemistry. After college he worked at 3M Corporation from 1951 to 1953, and served in the United States Army from 1953 to 1955. Subsequent to his army service, he entered the graduate program in anthropology at the University of Chicago and wrote his thesis under the supervision of Robert McC. Adams. Pat received his Ph.D. in 1962 and his dissertation, entitled *The Ceramic Sequence of the Central Highlands, Chiapas, Mexico*, was published by the New World Archaeological



Figure 1. Pat at Tikal in the mid-1960s, University of Pennsylvania's Tikal Project. Archive photo by Dennis Puleston.

Foundation in 1965. Prior to receiving his degree he taught at the University of Mississippi during the fall semester of 1960. Upon completion of his Ph.D. he taught for two years at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville (1962–1964), before moving to the University of Arizona in 1964, where he taught until his retirement in 2000 as Professor Emeritus in the Department of Anthropology. From the outset his research was characterized by a meticulous attention to the data and strengthened by the value he placed on cross-cultural and comparative analyses.

After Pat's work in Chiapas, he joined the University of Pennsylvania's Tikal Project in the mid-1960s (Figure 1), thus beginning his lifelong research on Maya ceramics, and his love for working in Guatemala (as well as the personal discovery, upon climbing Temple I at Tikal, that he disliked pyramids and was afraid of heights). His ceramic research prioritizing vessel form as a chronological marker along with type has continued to frame Maya pottery analysis for all who have followed. Working at Tikal also served to crystallize Pat's interests in Maya population, settlement, and subsistence, particularly the prehistoric use of *bajos*, and the structure of Classic Maya polities and their collapse. Those of us who had the pleasure of working with Pat, both in the classroom as well as in the field, quickly learned that he was happiest while surveying the rough terrain of Peten *bajos*, or discussing the intricacies of Maya ceramic typology at the end of a long day in the field, lukewarm beer in hand.

During the 1970s, Pat's love for *bajos* led to an interest in understanding more about the subsistence base for the large populations that inhabited Classic period Maya centers, as well as the role of subsistence and other factors in the decline of southern lowland Maya civilization. Consequently, Pat organized one of the first seminars at the School for Advanced Research (SAR; then the School for American Research) in October 1970. This advanced seminar brought together eminent scholars of Maya archaeology; they debated a variety of explanations for the Maya collapse, and Pat's 1973 edited volume, *The Classic Maya Collapse*, continues to be relevant today. It demonstrated both the complex and varied nature of the collapse across the Maya lowlands. The book also stimulated research into "collapse" in other parts of the world, which has since yielded a veritable cascade of publications.

Equally groundbreaking was Pat's early interest in, and the use of, satellite radar mapping to examine prehistoric Maya land use and settlement in the late 1970s, which produced some of the first evidence of the prehistoric use of wetlands for agriculture (Adams



Figure 2. Pat surveying near the Bajo de La Justa, Guatemala, in 2002. Photo by Tom Gidwitz.

et al. 1981). This focus continued throughout Pat's career. He began a partnership with NASA in the late 1980s that continued for more than two decades, utilizing more advanced Landsat imagery and radar mapping of settlement and pre-Columbian Maya wetland agricultural systems. Much of this research was focused on the Bajo de La Justa (Figure 2), located between the sites of Nakum and Yaxha in the Peten, approximately 29 km southeast of Tikal (Culbert et al. 1995, 1997; Gidwitz 2002), with funding from NASA, the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI), and the National Sciences Foundation (NSF).

The many years Pat spent slogging through *bajos*, naturally led to a curiosity about the relationships between subsistence and the size of pre-Columbian Maya populations. Prior to his collaborative research, many archaeologists assumed that the Maya relied on slash and burn (*milpa*) agriculture and discounted the use of wetlands, such as *bajos*, to increase the amount of arable land as well as allowing the planting and harvesting of dry season crops. Pat was convinced that the only explanation for the large population densities in Maya city-states was the extensive use of *bajos*, which allowed higher densities than had previously been suspected (Figure 3). The result of these investigations was the seminal edited volume, *Precolonian Population History in the Maya Lowlands*, in 1990 (Culbert and Rice 1990). Pat's contributions in this area can be seen in much of the subsequent work on Maya population and subsistence (Dunning et al. 2002).

In his later research, Pat was most intrigued by the intellectual developments in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphs, prompting him to organize yet another SAR seminar in 1986. This conference brought together specialists in epigraphy, archaeology, and art history (as well as Norman Yoffee, a non-Mayanist discussant). Pat insisted that Maya studies needed to incorporate knowledge from newly deciphered inscriptions along with archaeological



Figure 3. Pat atop temple at Yaxha, Guatemala, in 2002. Photo by Tom Gidwitz.

findings. The results of the conference appeared in his edited volume, *Classic Maya Political History* (Culbert 1991).

Pat's characteristics as a mentor and teacher *par excellence* were to provide gentle support at every stage of a student's career, mixing humor with encouragement for their projects. He actively published with students, stressed the value of simple sentences without jargon, and exhibited professionalism at all times. Pat insisted that his students needed a cross-cultural perspective to truly understand more effectively the ancient Maya. He was able to explain Maya civilization to non-archaeologists as well, as can be seen in two well-known books for non-specialists (Culbert 1974, 1993b). He especially enjoyed serving as the archaeology tour leader on many trips to the Maya world, sharing his knowledge and love of the region's past and present. When not talking archaeology with colleagues



Figure 4. Pat's marriage to Bobbi Culbert in 1958. Photo courtesy of Bobbi Culbert.

and students, he would happily discuss the latest performances of operas in Tucson and Santa Fe, or his beloved Arizona Wildcat basketball team, or his favorite Dunkin' Donuts.

In 1965, Pat helped to organize and publish the results of the First Lowland Maya Ceramics Conference held in Guatemala City (Willey et al. 1967). Pat loved working in Guatemala and with Guatemalan colleagues whom he respected, and who reciprocated their appreciation for Pat's work and friendship. From 1981 to 1982 Pat was a National Endowment for the Humanities Resident Scholar at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, where he worked to complete his *opus magnum* on the Tikal ceramics (Culbert 1993a). His final publication (Culbert and Rands 2007) was also a milestone, reflecting on important changes to the analytical toolkit for studying Maya ceramics. Many of these advances were the result of Pat's contributions, coming full circle some four decades later. Pat's academic and personal legacy remains not only in his impressive body of research and publications, but also in the generations of scholars he has mentored and who revere him.

Pat married Barbara (Bobbi) Baker, whom he met at the University of Chicago in 1958 (Figure 4). Bobbi's own career as

an opera and theater costumer and artist enriched Pat's life immeasurably. He is survived by Bobbi, their four children, nine grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. Pat died in Santa Fe on March 28, 2013, surrounded by his family and friends. *Que te vayas bien*, Pat.

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