

# MRS. SCAIFE

*& the Jade Mask*

A MEMOIR OF TIKAL BY STUART D. SCOTT





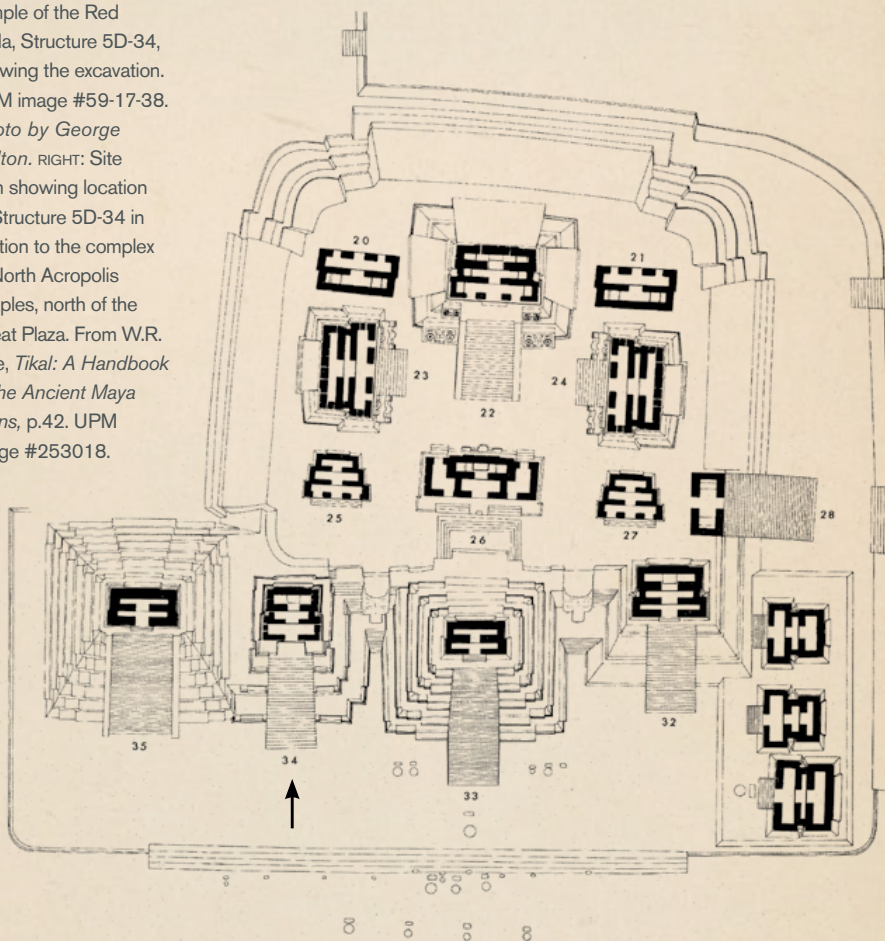
*On the warm spring morning of March 5, 1959, as the sun first appeared over the tiered rainforest canopy of mahogany, ceiba, and sapodilla trees, a significant day was dawning at Tikal.*

The day started uneventfully except for the planned departure of some important visitors. Publicity about the Penn Museum's Tikal Project, through its contract with *Life* magazine, had brought worldwide attention to this largest known Maya ceremonial center, a site shrouded by the jungles of lowland Guatemala for more than a thousand years. In the Tikal Project's early days, visitors arrived in ever-increasing numbers, wanting to see for themselves this once-populous and sprawling urban center of pyramids, palaces, residences, and ball-courts, complete with scores of inscribed stone monuments. Among the notables who had arrived without fanfare during the 1959 season were His Majesty, ex-King Leopold III of Belgium, and Golda Meir, Foreign Minister, and later Prime Minister of Israel. And now, during the first week of March, Director Ed Shook and our crew were hosting another party of distinguished visitors: Mrs. Sarah Mellon Scaife and several other friends of the Penn Museum. Mrs. Scaife was the niece of Andrew W. Mellon—an heiress to the Mellon industrial, oil, and banking fortune—and, through her foundation, a major benefactor of the Tikal Project.

We said goodbye to the Scaife party the night before, knowing we would be at work when our important guests were getting up and preparing for their mid-morning departure. The crewmembers were dispersing to their respective tasks. My assign-

ment, Structure 5D-34, was an Early Classic chambered temple, one of four facing directly on the Great Plaza, the geographic and ceremonial center of Tikal. In 1958, a year before my arrival, 5D-34 was known more romantically as the Temple of the Red Stela, so named for the sculpted stone monument discovered in the innermost of its three temple rooms. At sometime in the ancient past, Stela 26, as it was catalogued, had been deliberately mutilated, but broken fragments found in room fill still bore traces of the original red paint that had covered its carved surfaces. In his own account of Stela 26 and its temple, Shook

OPPOSITE PAGE: The Temple of the Red Stela, Structure 5D-34, showing the excavation. UPM image #59-17-38. Photo by George Holton. RIGHT: Site plan showing location of Structure 5D-34 in relation to the complex of North Acropolis temples, north of the Great Plaza. From W.R. Coe, *Tikal: A Handbook of the Ancient Maya Ruins*, p.42. UPM image #253018.





pondered past human behavior with the question: what caused the outburst of violence at Tikal, which resulted in the brutal smashing of a superbly carved monument? The answer to that question would not likely be found in further excavation, yet 5D-34 remained a focal point of interest for us. Our research in 1959 now focused on the architectural development of the pyramidal building and its relationship to the historical continuum of Tikal.

## THE TRENCH

Once the 1959 excavation season started in earnest, so too began my apprenticeship to Shook. I felt privileged that this major figure among Mayanists had charged me with overseeing, under his direction, the excavation of a massive axial trench through the pyramid supporting Temple 5D-34. In today's conservative spirit of resource preservation, excavation on such a scale could probably not be justified. Yet the sequence and complexity of Maya culture at such once-magnificent centers of residence, ceremony, and government could never be

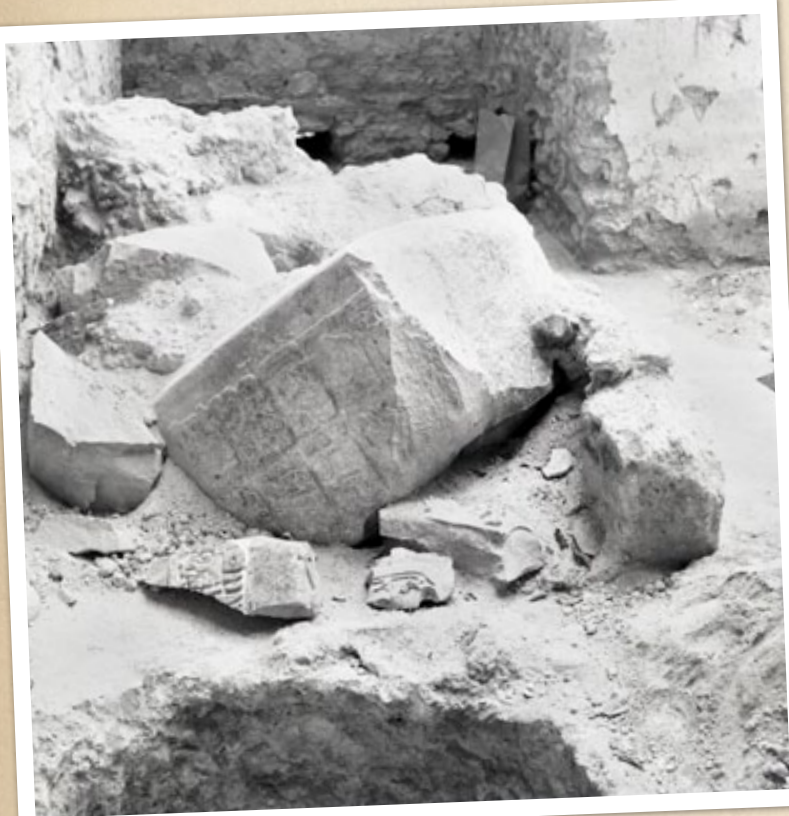


described, much less understood, without large-scale and intrusive excavation. With the room debris from collapse of the vaulted roofs having been previously cleared, we began cutting through the floor of the outer or front room. My field notes for Saturday, February 21, include the entry: "Found a cache hole in floor of the outer room of Str 34, at the step to the middle room. Apparently it was overlooked last year."

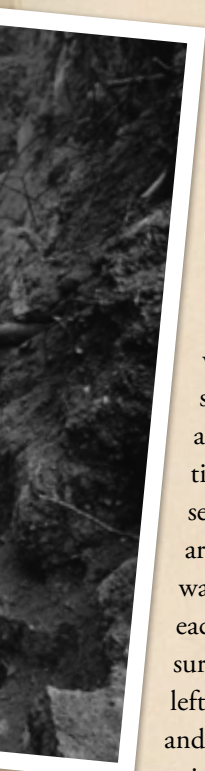
A year earlier, two such ceremonial repositories were discovered in the original floors of the temple rooms. The contents—consisting of objects of incised obsidian, jade, and crystalline hematite—heightened the possibility that this newest cavity or pocket might also contain a similar array of treasures. After all, I reasoned, someone in the past took the trouble to dig and refill holes

in the floors to conceal something of importance. Almost predictably, then, our finding of the first cache was followed by the discovery of a second, both cut into the floor of the outer room. Unfortunately these newest small cists or

LEFT: Stela 26 (the Red Stela) found in the rear room of Structure 5D-34 in 1958. UPM image #58-4-367. Photo by William Coe. ABOVE: Tikal Director, Ed Shook (LEFT), and the author. Photo courtesy Stuart Scott.







gravel-filled cavities produced only a few sherds and flint—fragments of things perhaps left behind after more valuable objects had been stolen.

Still early in the season, the possibility remained for finding other cists or floor cache features, as the main trenching operation continued down through the truncated mound. While the workmen chopped with broad-blade axes through the compacted limestone rubble that had been laboriously laid in by the ancient Maya, I took photographs, made cross-sectional drawings, recorded every salient detail I could see, and collected the excavated pottery and other artifacts. Over the months of excavation, the pyramid was found to consist of several platforms or terraces, each finished by the Maya with a smooth plastered surface, which was probably left to solidify before the next and slightly smaller platform unit was added above it.

By early March, after many weeks of work, we had extended the excavation almost to the level of the second of three artificial terraced platforms that comprised the 5D-34 pyramidal sub-structure. I knew that the slate-smooth surface would appear and several more days would be needed to remove the rocky overburden and sweep it through the whole length of the trench. There seemed no prospect of being surprised, nothing yet to suggest that I would spend the rest of the morning of March 5, belly down on that floor, feet in the air, casting my eyes on a small treasure concealed for 1,500 years.

## THE TREASURE

The first clue came after the routine good morning exchanges with the native crew. “Se encuentra un hueco, Señor!” “¿Dónde?” “Alla, al borde del piso.” (“We found an opening, sir!” “Where?” “At the edge of the floor.”) The workmen directed my attention to a circular cut in the floor found in the hour before my arrival. I took my first look. It was like other cists we had seen, a hollowed-out hole that had been dug into the upper platform levels, then resealed but never plastered over. A circle of repacked limey soil was easily visible.

I had no expectations, recalling that our excavations of the other cists had been a succession of disappointments. These pits had been created originally to conceal some dedicatory offering, perhaps to the pyramid, or more likely to the deity the pyramid was dedicated to, but in



Construction of backdirt slide,  
Structure 5D-34, May 1959. UPM  
image #59-17-305.



each case there was nothing but a few obsidian blades or sherds mixed in the marly fill. And here this morning was yet another find, destined to come to nothing.

Sound carries well in the rainforest, even from the far distant airstrip. At the moment I heard the aircraft engines warming up, announcing the departure of Mrs. Scaife and her party, I noticed Shook's jeep approaching at the far end of the Great Plaza. "Another cache," I called out to him, as he clambered up the rough face of the supporting platform. Running one of the largest archaeological projects in the world never left much time for the Director to stay in one spot, but this exchange was too abrupt even to be called a briefing. On first glance at the new discovery, Shook's actions, even more than his words, answered my unspoken question. "You finally have something there, fella," he said

with more agitation and promise than I had ever heard from this man. "Clean the surface all around and start digging out the cist. I'll be back shortly." Neither he nor anyone could know what the pit might contain, if anything, yet his words and manner seemed to draw a precise conclusion that something was there. Was he unconsciously applying some operational intelligence acquired from years of field experience? I had seen such forensic insight applied elsewhere at Tikal when he pointed out to less experienced excavators that they were inadvertently digging in the heart of a pyramid, while troweling in the midst of a confusing medium of collapsed rubble.

With a parting nod to my superior, who was now sprinting across the North Terrace, I went to work to unplug the concealed compartment beneath the floor, at the same time

baffled by Shook's emphatic confidence that something was there. I emptied the cist to a depth of about eight inches revealing a large, solid limestone cap. Tapping the capstone with the handle of my trowel produced a resonant echo that telegraphed the presence of a small hollow chamber beneath the stone. With a little more scraping and brushing, the loose, limey grit began falling through two openings where the capstone did not quite span the width of the pit.

With Shook's hurried return to the airstrip, the pilots were signaled to shut down the engines, and now Mrs. Scaife and her entourage were clustered around the small cist, giving the whole affair a sense of developing drama.



Upper end of trench, cutting through floors of 5D-34 temple rooms. UPM image #59-17-94.





Exercising his prerogative as Project Director, Shook began his own investigation. Nosing a flashlight toward one of the two slots on each side of the capstone, he announced, in that flat tone that sometimes generates more electricity than a hysterical cry, “a pot...brownware cylinder...seems to have a lid.” As if not wanting to trust himself with the task, he backed off and instructed two of the laborers to work the capstone loose and carefully remove it from its threatening position above the vessel. And there it stood. In the half shadowed interior of the cavity was a plain brownware pottery cylinder with a matching saucer serving as a lid, everything still in place and unseen by human eyes since the day a Maya priest, perhaps in a jaguar robe and feather headdress, lovingly laid away the ceramic time capsule. Excitement was running high. Here we were on the verge of revealing something of ancient Tikal and its ways.

The mid-morning sun was high enough now to cast a natural light on the contents as Shook, with a touch appropriate to the disarming of a delicate explosive, lifted the small inverted plate lid. There, in a nest of aged seaweed, stingray spines, red *Spondylus* shells, and other marine cult items, was an exquisite figurine head, an inch and a half-high Maya face topped by a bird mask, all fashioned from a mosaic of paper-thin chips of jade and shell—in workmanship, a fine and precious object from the pre-Columbian past. For a moment, I stood at the border of the transcendent and my devotion to empirical fact. This was not



CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: The partially excavated Cache 43, showing the cylinder's lid still in place. UPM image #59-17-81. The contents of Cache 43 included seaweed, stingray spines, red *spondylus* shells, the jade mask (CIRCLED), and other cult objects. UPM image #59-17-85. The miniature mask from Tikal, Peten, Guatemala, dates to the Early Classic period. Photograph courtesy of the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (Guatemala City, Guatemala), Reg. 1.1.1.962, MUNAE 22795, MUNAE Digital Archive.





The mosaic mask from 5D-34 is only one among many extraordinary objects that make up the ancient Maya universe of iconographic and ritual art in the form of censers, figurines, pottery, jewelry, stucco modeling, mural painting, sculpture, and more. The passion for finding the beautiful and the attention-getting cannot replace, nor should it, archaeology's search for the structure and process of human behavior. Yet the elaborate

Temple of the Red Stela as seen from the Great Plaza, looking northwest showing Temple 33 to the right and Temple 35 to the left. UPM image #59-17-308. Photo by Stuart Scott.

cached offering from 5D-34 was a contributing factor to the importance and majesty of Tikal, as it illustrated the exceptional skill of Tikal's artisans. In a larger sense, all such objects

archaeology as science, but rather archaeology as emotion. What thoughts lay behind the concealment of this magnificent reliquary? The secret of its existence had been safely buried for centuries. Could that ancient priest, praying to a god, have even remotely imagined that so many years later, this small sacred treasury would once again be seen?

Mrs. Scaife was widely known for her philanthropy, having contributed millions to various charities and institutions. Archaeology, too, had benefited from her generous support of the six-month investigation of Structure 5D-34, the Temple of the Red Stela. Although she had donated to and visited other major excavations around the world, she had never witnessed anything at the moment of discovery, that is, until now. And she nearly missed this one by a margin of minutes. It was then, I think, that we all experienced a sense of delight for our patron, when she took her turn in the small space to view that beautiful vestige of antiquity, happy as we all were to have experienced such an enchanting encounter.

awaken among museum visitors a passion for the magic of ancient Maya heritage and perhaps a greater appreciation for the archaeological inquiry itself. ●



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#### FOR FURTHER READING

- "Secrets of the Rain Forest." *Life Magazine*, October 3, 1958.
- Coe, W.R. *Tikal. A Handbook of the Ancient Ruins*. Philadelphia: The University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, 1967.
- Shook, E.M. "The Temple of the Red Stela." *Expedition* 1.1 (1958): 27-34.
- Digitized photographs can be accessed by a web search "Tikal Digital Access Project" ([www.famsi.org/research/tikal/](http://www.famsi.org/research/tikal/)), and digitized movies at "Tikal 1959" ([www.youtube.com-tikal1959](http://www.youtube.com-tikal1959))

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The Penn Museum, in collaboration with the government of Guatemala, conducted archaeological investigations and conservation work at Tikal from 1956 until 1970. Edwin Shook was Field Director from 1956 to 1961.