Green Gold and Silver Cities: Gregory Mason, 20th Century Maya Archaeology, and United States Imperialism in Central America

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Introduction

Two photos of Gregory Mason found inside his passport, circa 1930.

Gregory Mason (1889-1968) was a journalist, archaeologist, adventurer, and author operating primarily in the early 20th century. A New York native and Williams alum, Mason was advertised in a 1931 issue of The Williams Record as a preeminent "explorer, author, lecturer" and "noted authority on Yucatan and prehistoric Central American civilization."[1] His career ranged wildly, from a war correspondent for Theodore Roosevelt's *The Outlook* magazine, to a leader of American expeditions in search of Maya ruins in Belize, to the head of NYU's journalism department and fiction author. His uniquely multifaceted career, especially his work in Maya archaeology, provides a potent lens through which forces of American imperialism in the interwar period can be examined. Seeking to expand its economic power and

[1] "Mason to Speak on 'Land of Rain Gods.'" The Williams Record. Dec. 5, 1931. Vol XLV. Williams College Special Collections. pg. 1.

political hegemony over the Western Hemisphere, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries the United States turned its gaze southward towards Central America. An area rich in natural resources, the Yucatan Peninsula proved to be a promising target for the machines of American imperialism. Maya archaeology (and by extension, archaeologists) became a tool utilized by the United States to help establish social, economic, and cultural influence in Central America and garner support for their involvement in the area back home. American chicle harvesters, museums, and individual archaeologists formed a triangular symbiotic relationship to maximize economic and cultural capital extraction from the Yucatan. This alliance created an exponentially intensifying nexus of power that grew to underpin United States influence in the region. Corporations like the American Chicle Company and the United Fruit Company made entry into the Yucatan Peninsula in the very early 20th century, developing transportation infrastructure and accruing knowledge of the territory. At the same time, burgeoning interest in the Maya arose from American intellectual groups like the Carnegie Institution, the Harvard Peabody Museum, and the Museum of the American Indian that were looking to push the frontier of exploration past the continental United States to compete with European institutions. Archaeologists, taking advantage of both the infrastructure created by U.S. companies and funding from museums, became the agents on the ground active in these processes of exploration, recording, and extraction that were essential to American operations in the Yucatan Peninsula.

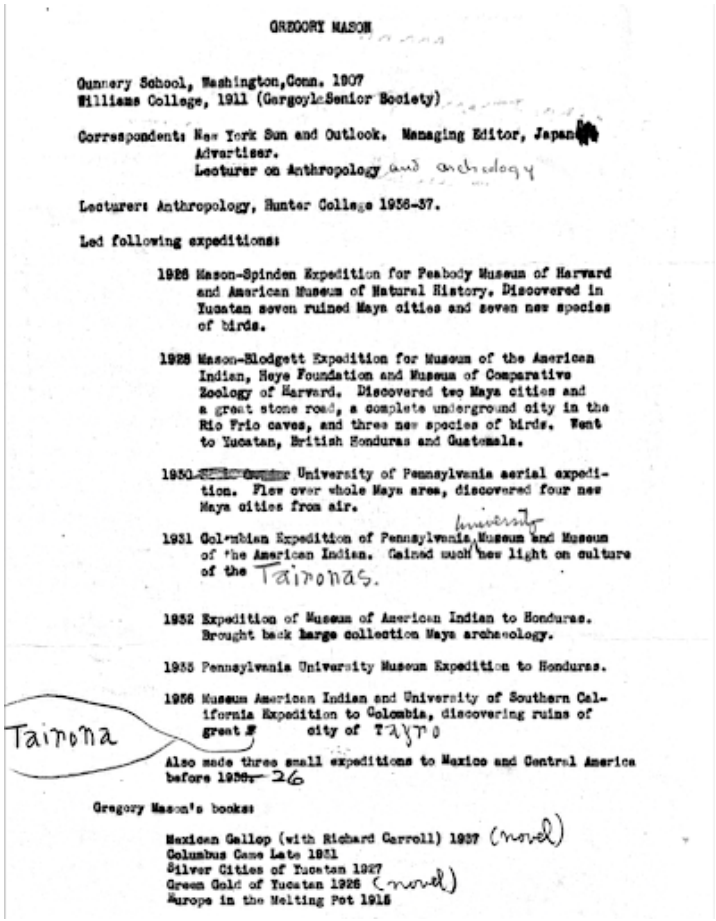
Gregory Mason made his career at the center of these interconnected systems in the 1920s and 30s. Using funds and infrastructure from chicle companies and museum institutions, Mason's expeditions found new Maya sites and brought back artifacts to fill the glass cases of New York's museum galleries. His key contribution, however, was his popularization of the Maya to the American public, working both to garner support for continued operations and to justify the entrenchment of American corporations in the Yucatan. As one of the first professionals to combine archaeological practice and popular journalism, his writing was especially influential to the rise in interest in the ancient Maya at the time. He worked to tie the modern United States to the ancient Maya, coining the moniker "First Families of America" and relating Maya achievements to present industrial advancements in the States. Despite Mason's lauding of the Maya as an exceptional culture and his celebration of their achievements, the elevation of the ancient Maya perpetuated by archaeologists led to a convenient dismissal of the modern Maya still living in Central America. Through recorded interactions with indigenous Maya, the dominance of Maya archaeological practice by white, wealthy American men, and derogatory comparisons to their ancient ancestors, depictions of indigenous people often both ignored the key role they played in American corporate and archaeological operations and denied the modern Maya ownership of their own history. Mason and his colleagues worked to co-opt the Maya's ancient past as an American one, implicitly providing justification for American control of Maya land and their history in the present and future. The concatenation of corporate capital, extractive museum policies, archaeological ambition, and media sensationalism in the Yucatan Peninsula defined American imperialism in the region and its relationship with both the ancient and modern Maya culture.

Brief Note on Methodologies

The main source of information for the research and writing of this paper is the Gregory Mason Papers available in the Williams College Special Collections. This collection, consisting of 21 boxes of ephemera, including primary source documents, letters, journals, drafts of work, newspaper clippings, and images, provided the foundation for this piece. These papers were personal property of Gregory Mason himself and provided new insight into his public work while also revealing previously unknown information about his life and career. The author spent the fall 2022 semester working through 12 of these 21 boxes. The original work borne of that research is a longer report, which has been condensed here. All photos and figures come from the Gregory Mason Papers unless otherwise noted.

Another key resource was a film about Gregory Mason's first Maya archaeological expedition in 1926. Video footage taken on the expedition is publicly available on YouTube thanks to Bob Connelly, who wrote, produced, and edited a documentary style video about the party's archaeological mission into the Yucatan. The video is entirely footage from Mason's companion Ogden McClurg's camera, voiced over with Connelly's commentary and quotes from Mason's book Silver Cities of Yucatan (1927).The footage was given to Connelly

courtesy of McClurg's family. The video is entitled "Silver Cities of Yucatan: The Mason-Spinden Expedition", and can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntISa5pllgo&t=1209s.



GREGORY MASON

Gunnery School, Washington, Conn. 1907
Williams College, 1911 (Gargoyle-Senior Society)

Correspondent: New York Sun and Outlook. Managing Editor, Japan Advertiser.
Lecturer on Anthropology and archeology

Lecturer: Anthropology, Hunter College 1936-37.

Led following expeditions:

1926 Mason-Spinden Expedition for Peabody Museum of Harvard and American Museum of Natural History. Discovered in Yucatan seven ruined Maya cities and seven new species of birds.

1928 Mason-Blodgett Expedition for Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation and Museum of Comparative Zoology of Harvard. Discovered two Maya cities and a great stone road, a complete underground city in the Rio Frio caves, and three new species of birds. Went to Yucatan, British Honduras and Guatemala.

1930 University of Pennsylvania aerial expedition. Flew over whole Maya area, discovered four new Maya cities from air.

1931 Colombian Expedition of Pennsylvania Museum and Museum of the American Indian. Gained much new light on culture of the Taironas.

1932 Expedition of Museum of American Indian to Honduras. Brought back large collection Maya archaeology.

1935 Pennsylvania University Museum Expedition to Honduras.

1936 Museum American Indian and University of Southern California Expedition to Colombia, discovering ruins of great city of Tayro

Tairona

Also made three small expeditions to Mexico and Central America before 1926 26

Gregory Mason's books:

Mexican Gallop (with Richard Carroll) 1927 (novel)
Columbus Came Late 1931
Silver Cities of Yucatan 1927
Green Gold of Yucatan 1926 (novel)
Europe in the Melting Pot 1915

An overview of Mason's expedition history and published works, in his own words, circa 1940. Williams College Special Collections.

I. Early 20th Century Maya Archaeology: The Mason-Spinden Expedition (1926)

In his book *Silver Cities of Yucatan*, Gregory Mason waxes poetically that "there is glamor and mystery enough in a quest of ancient cities in Central America, yet the finest part of the adventure is intellectual rather than physical."[2] Despite this romantic sentiment, these intellectual pursuits were in reality undergirded by extensively planned, months-long expeditions by American archaeologists and other interested parties into the dense jungles of Central America. Archaeological expeditions by Americans to the region had been occurring occasionally since John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood in the mid-19th century. In this early 20th century period, they had become newly institutionalized with the combined rise of financially powerful academic institutions and incursion of American corporate interests into Central America. The typical 1920s and '30s expedition into the Yucatan Peninsula was financed by museums or universities, corporations with interests and infrastructure in the region, or newspapers capitalizing on burgeoning public excitement about the ancient Maya. These bodies, especially museums and universities, wanted a piece of the popular "new" sphere of Maya archaeology, looking to add valuable objects to their collections or be associated with a Maya site of aesthetic or academic interest. Gregory Mason's first foray into Maya archaeology, the Mason-Spinden Expedition, provides a representative example of the culture of exploration and the nature of archaeological expeditions in the period.

The Mason-Spinden Expedition was more exploratory and less extractive in form than other, later expeditions that Mason participated in, but is the most well-documented through his published account, *Silver Cities of Yucatan*, and the plethora of articles chronicling the journey that he wrote for *The New York Times* in exchange for their sponsorship. For three months in early 1926, Mason and four other Americans—archaeologist Dr. Herbert J. Spinden, shipboard navigator and naval reserves commander Ogden Trevor McClurg, leading Harvard ornithologist Ludlow Griscom, and young artist Francis Whiting traveled by boat, mule, and foot throughout the Mexican state of Quintana Roo (Figures 1, 2). From the planning process, the expedition had a rough itinerary based on advice from other archaeologists such as Sylvanus Morely, information from the Chicle Development Corporation, and known sites of potential interest for both Griscom's ornithology and Mason and Spinden's archaeology. There was, however, plenty of room for improvisation, changes, and the chasing of promising leads, reflecting the flexible outline of many similar contemporary expeditions. Expeditions of this caliber were planned to cost a few thousand dollars, with variation depending on duration and amount of members—Mason asked for $4000 in 1933 (equivalent to about $91,000 today) for an expedition

[2] "Mason, Gregory. *Silver Cities of Yucatan*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927. Print. vii.

of similar intensity.[3] Leaving on January 9th on the steamship S.S. Saramacca for Belize, the capital of what was then British Honduras, Mason and Spinden arrived in Quintana Roo and immediately rented a schooner and two dinghies (christened the HMS Albert, the Imp, and the Delirium Tremens, respectively) from the British and set off for travel along the coast. The expedition traveled primarily by water, spending days on board the HMS Albert broken up by exploratory excursions onto spotted islands or into local towns.

Locals proved generously helpful to Mason and his team, becoming essential to the success of their operation. Word of archaeologists in the area looking for old buildings and willing to pay for information tended to spread, and people often came to them, looking for tall men in classic pith helmets and khaki clothing which members of the expedition often wore to impress locals and identify themselves as professional academics.[4] In this period in Central America, "information leading to the discovery of ruins is not given away but sold."[5] On the Mason-Spinden Expedition, Mason offered one of his hired guides one hundred pesos if a ruin he advertised to the party was legitimate, and other bonuses if he could "get wind" of any others before they returned.[6] These collaborations were often unexpected and spontaneous. The expedition's best tip came from a trip to Santa Cruz de Bravo, where Mason and Spinden traveled to explore and liaison with General May, the region's Maya leader, and Julio Martin, the chief regional chicle buyer. While there, a man entered their lodging unannounced and offered to show the pair some ruins he knew about, eventually leading them to the site of Muyil.[7] Working off of the developing relationship between chicle harvesters and archaeologists, Mason and other explorers took advantage of local knowledge for their work and engaged on a regular basis with indigenous people in the regions they were exploring, often for the short-term benefit of both parties.

The Mason-Spinden Expedition: Mason (bottom left), Griscom (top left), Spinden (top right), Whiting (bottom center), and McClurg (bottom right)

Figure 1: The Mason Spinden Expedition: Mason (bottom left), Griscom (top left), Spinden (top right), Whiting (bottom center), and McClurg (bottom right). Still from video footage taken by McClurg on the expedition, 1926

Armed with information, the exploratory process was often relatively procedural: once a ruin or site of interest was discovered, pictures and measurements were taken, observations and location were recorded, and occasionally an overnight stay was made in the case of larger sites that took longer to document. Once satisfied, the party would return to the nearest town, and the process of sailing, hunting, exploring, conversing with locals, and tracing leads into the jungle would restart. It was this cycle of reconnaissance, local interaction, exploration, and discovery that characterized many Central American expeditions in this period. More specifically, traveling "into territory never before penetrated by archaeologists," the Mason-Spinden Expedition revealed the location of "seven cities and several lesser sites" which included cities at Muyil and Okop as well as multiple smaller sites near Cozumel Island.[8] Introducing Gregory Mason to the realities of conducting and executing an expedition to Central America, this exploration proved both a testing ground of Mason's ability and a confirmation of

[3] Letter from Gregory Mason to Horace H.F. Jayne, May 16, 1931. Gregory Mason Papers, Williams College Special Collections.

[4] Gregory Mason stood at an impressive 6'5", according to his passport. His recollections of his time exploring feature many gripes about too-small hammocks and too-short ceilings.

[5] Mason, Gregory. "America's Buried Past". The Saturday Evening Post, January 19, 1929. 38.

[6] Mason, Gregory. *Silver Cities of Yucatan*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927. Print. 140.

[7] Mason, Gregory. *Silver Cities of Yucatan*. 139.

[8] Mason, Gregory. "Ruins of the Mayas Yield New History". The New York Times, May 9th, 1926.

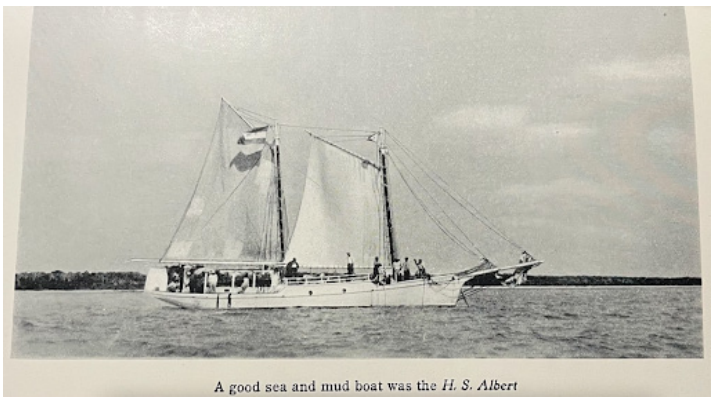
his commitment to making a career of this type of work (Figure 3).

Archaeological expeditions into the Yucatan Peninsula served the dual purpose of discovery and reconnaissance. American archaeologists and academics charted, cataloged, recorded, and mapped not only Maya sites, but vast swaths of rural land in Central America that were previously unknown to non-indigenous people (Figures 4, 5). This formal accumulation of knowledge that was once exclusive to indigenous communities was a key service archaeologists provided to the American imperial enterprise. This knowledge-gathering, of course, had to be supported by local chicleros and indigenous people whom archaeologists often relied on to get initial access. Local Maya resistance to American intrusion often came in the form of exclusion—denying explorers access to sites, reticence to reveal locations of ruins, and keeping cultural practice secret—but once Americans got their proverbial foot in the door, ever-accelerating processes of imperial extraction became difficult to push out. The purpose of exploration was not only academic, but colonial and exploitative, uncovering ruins and deciphering ancient Maya culture not for the benefit of locals but for the Americans who can then claim ownership over it. Archaeology was the vehicle which enabled the ownership of Maya history and culture by museums, archaeologists, and intellectuals, and denied Maya most agency over their own past.

A map of the Mason-Spinden Expedition's route, marker with the double line

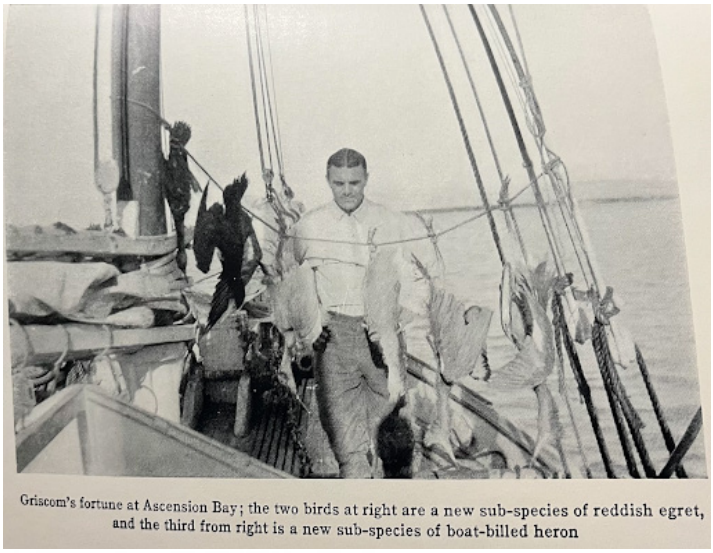
Figure 2: Route of the Mason-Spinden Expedition, marked here in thick line. Published in *Silver Cities of Yucatan*, 1926.


Whiting (center) with the two local crewmembers of the HMS Albert


A good sea and mud boat was the *H. S. Albert*


Spinden (left) and Mason (right) posing with the first Maya ruin the expedition found, named the "Shrine of the Ancient Mariner"

Figure 3: Assorted images of the Mason-Spinden Expedition, taken on the expedition by party



Griscom's fortune at Ascension Bay; the two birds at right are a new sub-species of reddish egret, and the third from right is a new sub-species of boat-billed heron

Gregory Mason in Chichen Itza, 1926

Members of the expedition including Mason (furthest left) sporting their pith helmets, which they believed helped distinguish them as archaeologists and prevented antagonism from potentially hostile groups.

sourced from *Silver Cities of Yucatan* and video footage member Ogden McClurg. 1926.

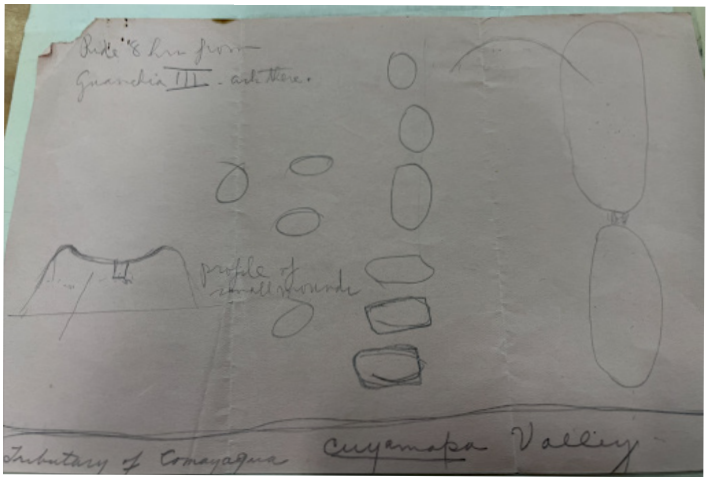


Figure 4: A map hand-drawn by Mason of a Maya site in Cuyamapa Valley. Date unknown. Williams College Special Collections.

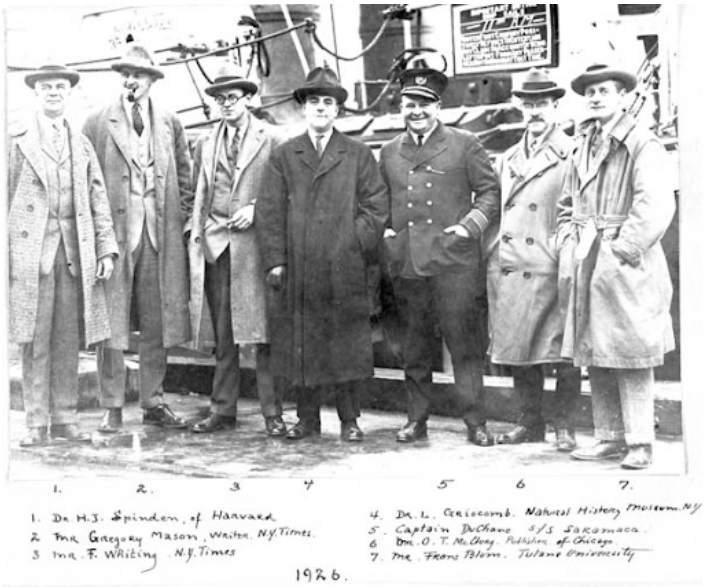


Figure 5: Another image of the party of the Mason-Spinden Expedition, labeled by Mason. 1926. Williams College Special Collections.

II. "Green Gold": Chicle, Archaeology, and Imperialism

Most if not all of the archaeological expeditions conducted by Americans in the early 20th century benefited from American chicle companies. Chicle, an organic rubber material harvested from sapodilla trees, was the key ingredient in many early chewing-gum products. The first chicle-based chewing gum was invented in 1859, its domestic popularity quickly giving rise to large corporations such as the American Chicle Company (incorporated in 1899) and spurring an invasion of foreign capital into southern Mexico

and Guatemala where sapodilla trees are primarily found.[9] These corporations, with the support of the Mexican government, quickly gained control of vast swaths of land in the Yucatan Peninsula—around the turn of the 20th century, North American companies controlled 800 thousand hectares of forest in Campeche.[10] Chicle itself is farmed by *chicleros* tapping sapodilla trees, using machetes to cut into the inner bark and drain chicle latex (Figure 6). The damage to the trees every year causes between 5 and 15% of them to die, making sapodilla farms difficult to maintain. This necessitated the venture of small camps of *chicleros* into the dense jungle in search of wild trees, a practice which proved remarkably conducive to the discovery of ancient Maya archaeological sites. Chicle harvesting takes hard work and expertise almost entirely held by the indigenous labor forces which foreign corporations employed, but predatory business practices by American companies ensured that these companies saw vast profits often at the expense of local people.[11] "La Chicleria" became a vast network of infrastructure, capital, and labor that entrenched American operations deep into the jungles of the Yucatan Peninsula.

Explorers like Gregory Mason relied on structures built and maintained by these American corporations to move through and explore Central America. Archaeologists and corporations were engaged in a symbiotic relationship—companies like the American Chicle Company provided archaeologist-adventurers like Mason with resources and infrastructure, and archaeology projects and their associated media worked as a public relations campaign to justify and exalt U.S. economic presence in Central America.[12] Mason himself often expressed appreciation for the chewing-gum industry; he describes the Mason-Spinden Expedition as only being made possible by the gum industry's growth in the region, and details using camps and trails established by the American Chicle Company during their exploration. Spinden, in his introduction to Mason's book *Silver Cities of Yucatan*, gives thanks to the United Fruit Company and the Chicle Development Company "for advice in organization and…use of invaluable facilities in the field."[13] *Chicleros* employed by these companies were also "naturalists, advisors, and guides to archaeologists" who often in their daily work "came across numerous archaeological sites under the cover of the jungle."[14] Archaeologists and commercial interests were closely intertwined, as material extraction made inroads for excavations that in turn reframed the exploitative methods of chicle harvesting as helpful for the noble cause of discovery and preservation. A mutually beneficial endeavor, archaeological exploration provided a prestigious luster to the raw economic extraction of chicle, fruit, and mahogany companies. This positive feedback loop of economic exploitation and archaeological investigation spread American power and influence further and further into the region, solidifying the country's imperial presence.

Archaeologists often saw the incursion of American corporations into the region as bringing needed industry and modernity. To them, partnership with corporations was an opportunity to bring both economic and intellectual development to Central American indigenous populations.

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[9] Mathews, Jennifer P., And Gillian P. Schultz. "The History of the Chewing Gum Industry in the Americas." *Chicle: The Chewing Gum of the Americas, From the Ancient Maya to William Wrigley*, University of Arizona Press, 2009, pp. 42.

[10] Ibid, pp. 39.

[11] "U.S. companies enticed laborers with the promise of cash advances (sometimes paying more to those with experience), as well as providing clothing, food, and all supplies needed for tapping chicle in company stores. In Guatemala, companies gave contratistas (jobbers) credit to purchase large equipment, and they in turn would give cash advances to the *chicleros* to equip themselves. The jobber would also provide the workers' families with monthly payments as well as supply the *chicleros* with medicine, food, and supplies during the working season. *Chicleros* had to sign a contract agreeing to provide a set amount of chicle latex for the season, from which the monthly payments and expenses would be deducted. Although some experienced workers profited under this system, others were exploited by paying high costs for supplies and taxes and suffered financial ruin." Ibid, pp. 55.

[12] The American Chicle Company was Mason's most frequent corporate collaborator, probably owing to a personal relationship with the president of the company from 1922-1950, Thomas H. Blodgett.

[13] Mason, Gregory. *Silver Cities of Yucatan*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927. Print. v.

[14] Mathews, Jennifer P., And Gillian P. Schultz. "The Chicleros." *Chicle: The Chewing Gum of the Americas, From the Ancient Maya to William Wrigley*, University of Arizona Press, 2009, pp. 72–92. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1smjwms.9. Accessed 28 Sep. 2022. pg. 88.

In *Silver Cities of Yucatan*, Mason records a conversation that Spinden had with the governor of Quintana Roo:

"Spinden, who is much more practical than archaeologists are commonly supposed to be, delights Governor Garza by arguing that the development of a port and railroad in Northern Quintana Roo on the track of the steamers from New Orleans to Central America would make a hustling commercial state of what is now a wilderness inhabited by a few Indians who exist by hunting turkeys and chicle."[15]

Mason also romanticizes the role of American corporations in Central America, implicitly crediting them with the intellectual advancement of Maya archaeology and implying that their work is providing a cultural service. He writes:

"In other cases the temples and palaces of the 'silver cities' of Yucatan and Guatemala are found by agents of other large American and British corporations than those interested in gum—that is, by men clearing the bush to plant bananas or by loggers cruising the primeval forest for mahogany. The wonderful buried past of America is literally being hewed—and chewed—out into daylight, where science may have a look at it."[16]

Mason's optimistic vocabulary here expresses appreciation for mechanisms of American imperial and extractive power in the Yucatan Peninsula. To him, they have been able to bring the culture of the Maya out of the darkness of ignorance that he implies it has been kept in by the supposedly apathetic indigenous population, and into the bright light of American scientific discovery. To Mason, industry's assistance to and enabling of Maya archaeology was instrumental in clearing the way for archaeological breakthroughs and societal advancement of modern Maya.

American archaeologists brought their belief in American exceptionalism and the transformative power of modern capitalism to Central America, wanting to remake the region in what they saw as the ideal image. Adopting a paternalistic attitude toward who they saw as a "backwards" population of modern Maya, they believed that they were preserving the ancient Maya past while bringing their modern descendants into the future with help from American capital. This ambition was embodied and intensified by the corporate entities that entrenched themselves into Central America. Seeking lucrative natural resources, they established infrastructure that enabled the exploitation of the environment and the indigenous people onto whose homelands they encroached. It was chicle, chicleros, and American corporations that made archaeology in Central America possible through vast networks of power that were made navigable for explorers and other intellectual interests. Economic imperialism perpetrated by the United States in the 1920s and 30s in the Yucatan Peninsula, through its ties to the Maya, provided the mechanisms by which archaeological and intellectual institutions operated.

Figure 6: Indigenous Mexican *chicleros* in their camp. Photograph by Underwood & Underwood, circa April 1923. United States Library of Congress.

III. The Museum Institution

Intellectual interest in the Maya as an ancient civilization grew rapidly in the early 20th century, alongside the rise of formal museums. Museums and universities all wanted to acquire Maya art, architecture, and cultural objects to add to their collections. Using archaeologists like Gregory Mason as agents, they engaged in a complex system of site discovery, excavation, and artifact extraction that worked to siphon knowledge, culture, and power away from modern indigenous Maya and into the sterile marble halls of American cultural institutions. Expeditions evolved to become not only academic and exploratory, but also extractive in purpose.

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[15] Mason, Gregory. *Silver Cities of Yucatan*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927. Print. v.

[16] Mason, Gregory. "America's Buried Past." The Saturday Evening Post, January 19, 1929. 37.

Using trails, mules, and capital from chicle companies, archaeologists with the financial backing of museums uncovered sites, blocked them off, dug them up, and shipped hundreds of pieces of Maya culture out of Central America. In doing so, museums denied the modern Maya ownership of the culture of their ancestors and excluded them from the creation of a cultural narrative, allowing America to assert intellectual imperial dominance. Though contributing to academic cultural understanding of the ancient Maya and the development of the field of Maya archaeology, practices of museums and the archaeologists they employed also often served the American imperial goal of dismissing the modern Maya and taking possession of the venerated culture of their ancient ancestors, literally and metaphorically.

Artifacts were the currency of museums in the early 20th century. As they worked to expand their collections, museums engaged archaeologists as their prime movers, offering to sponsor expeditions with the expectation that any artifacts uncovered would be brought back to them stateside. Gregory Mason was one of the most popular of these explorer-extractors due to his close relationship with many of the heads of prominent museums and the frequency with which he entered the Yucatan Peninsula in the 1920s and 30s. Under direct patronage and instruction of American museums like the Museum of the American Indian or the Peabody Museum, Mason returned several times to the region for the sole purpose of buying, selling, or excavating potential additions to museum collections. Mason discusses in a letter with George Heye, the director of the Museum of the American Indian, the purchase by the museum of artifacts Mason had gotten word of and their transportation back to his New York collection. His writing implies he was under orders for specific things for the museum—he apologizes for being unable to acquire any white marble vases, which are apparently popular— and writes "... if you do not instruct me to the contrary I shall simply keep on trying to get the things which you want most and failing that, get the next best thing to them."[17] Notably, Mason and his wife conducted an expedition for the National Museum of the American Indian and the Haye Foundation in 1932, where they brought a large body of artifacts from northern Honduras back to Washington, D.C. which still reside in the museum's collections (Figure 7). One of Mason's more well-known acquisition stories, that of the Kagaba mask, also came about because he was under specific instruction to acquire Central American indigenous masks for the Museum of the American Indian.[18] These instructions often focused on objects like marble vases that evoked Western standards of quality and sophistication, or were so exotic and "new" that it was as if they had never been seen before. American institutions valued original artifacts and were looking to curate collections from Central America, reflecting its emerging popularity as a exotic, ancient, and mysterious region.

As archaeologists like Mason became in part brokers and authenticators, artifacts and Maya monuments acquired a dollar valuation. The new commodification of archaeological

Figure 7a: Part of an article in The New York Times detailing Mason's 1932 expedition to Honduras for the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, featuring artifacts now in the museum collection. 1932.

[17] Letter from Dr. George G. Heye to Gregory Mason, April 24, 1932. Gregory Mason Papers, Williams College Special Collections.

[18] This story is one that was a frequent keynote for Mason's retellings of his adventures in Central America in lectures and talks, and will be elaborated on in the next section.

Figure 7b: The same article, but an original copy found and re-pieced together in the Williams College Special Collections, 2022.

objects and the commercialization of museum institutions meant that Mason's work took on more of an extractive approach to cater to these emerging capitalist frameworks within archaeology. Mason currently has, from just one expedition to Colombia in 1932, 286 original objects attributed to him in the Penn Museum.[19] It becomes difficult to justify this level of extraction under purely academic interest, raising questions about other forces driving early 20th century archaeology. This scale of acquisition reflects the acceleration of archaeological interest in the region, and the transformation of the archaeological object into both something of intellectual interest and an expression of American power. Through these objects, U.S. institutions became keepers and controllers of another culture and history. Most if not all of Mason's objects are relegated today to archives and backrooms, becoming more of a loss for the people of Central America than a gain for the United States. The motivation of museums in this period seems to have stemmed more from the ability to acquire the object and possess another culture and history than about learning—with the amount of unutilized excess, quantity over quality seems to have been the ruling order. This imperial process of extraction was primarily a collaborative effort between economic interests and intellectual institutions, encouraging the seizure of all types of Central American resources for the United States's benefit.

IV. "First Families of America": The Maya & American Intellectual Imperialism

Alongside his career as an archaeologist working with museum institutions, Gregory Mason was a prolific journalist, and arguably one of the first to combine popular journalism and scientific writing into a "popular archaeology." Writing numerous books and articles and giving lectures about the ancient Maya and his experiences in Central America, Mason became one of the primary conduits through which the American public learned about the ancient Maya. His place as the lynchpin between academic and public archaeological discourse gave Mason enormous influence to shape the narrative about the Maya in the public sphere. He used this power to educate and excite the public, but also to benefit the chicle companies and museums who sponsored him. Through his writing, he worked to justify American intellectual, archaeological, and economic imperial expansion into Central America and the extractive and exploitative policies that enabled that process. Almost a form of American propaganda, Mason's writing created a single, cohesive narrative that connected these systems of power and presented them positively to the American public. Mason's writings about his archaeological exploits varied wildly, from accounts of moments from expeditions, analysis of artifacts, and interpretations of ancient and modern Maya culture. It all, however, followed a core thread of both ancient Mayan and American exceptionalism, and a full endorsement of American activities in Central America. His most important contribution to the American conversation about the Maya was his belief that the Maya were the "First Families of America." It was this label that served a myriad of purposes. It connected the ancient Maya and their exceptional advancements to the modern United States, created an ancient American past to intellectually rival Europe's Greeks and Romans, gave America a reason to be interested in and collect Maya artifacts, and

[19] Penn Museum. Colombian Expedition, Gregory Mason, 1932 Accession Lot. Web.

dismissed the modern Maya's viability as keepers of their own culture.

a. "First Families"

Gregory Mason was seemingly the first person to use the phrase "First Families of America" or "First Families" in reference to the ancient Maya.[20] He creates a connection between "the most highly civilized of any of the ancient dwellers of the two Americas" and his own country to make a case for U.S. influence in Central America.[21] By portraying the ancient Maya as the ancestors of modern Americans, Mason positioned them as the progenitors of American exceptionalism. Calling them the "foster-ancestors" of the United States and "America's First Families" created a familial relationship between Americans and ancient Maya that explained the need for the United States to exert power in the region for what Mason believed to be the good of the common people of the Americas.[22] By naming them his "foster-ancestors", Mason adopts the Maya, simultaneously justifying through a paternalistic duty both intervention in Central America and writing the modern Maya out of the genealogy.

Mason writes that there are "beauties of American antiquity in Yucatan" that the more educated, appreciative Americans in the U.S. have the responsibility to find and protect as part of their ancestry.[23] He conflates the larger American continent with the United States, reinforcing the U.S.'s perceived hegemony in the region. Claiming these antiquities as "the buried past of America" as a whole, and not of the modern Maya, Mason asserts that they are American property which the U.S. has a right to extract. The U.S. is more suited to "preserve" or "protect" these cultural objects as the better, more knowledgeable, and more deserving heir to this ancient culture. By unmooring the modern Maya from their ancient culture, the United States could act as though the ancient Maya artifacts and sites sat abandoned, making their extractive policies a natural expansion of American power into an unoccupied frontier. As the most dominant power in the Western Hemisphere in the early 20th century, it was only logical that America's "protectorate" of modern Central America would extend into the past.

b. Ancient Maya, Modern America

Gregory Mason's early 20th century anthropological writing seeks to slot the Maya into humanity's progressive path to modernity that culminates in industrial, modern, Western society. He does this by depicting the Maya and their achievements as the origins of American industry: not only are the Maya involved in America's past, but they can be seen in its present. He alleges that the ancient Maya should be credited for skyscrapers: "...[their] development of an original style of architecture characterized by the dominance of vertical rather than horizontal surfaces—[is] an architecture whose possibilities for the crowded cities of the United States are being utilized by an increasing number of our own architects." He praises their intellectual, spiritual, agricultural, and technological achievements, writing that in many ways "life among the Maya presented resemblances to life in the United States today." He uses modern American concepts to describe Maya achievements—in an article titled "1000 Years Before Columbus," the byline states that "Ancient America was already a land of business men, recent archeological discoveries show, with well-developed industries, good roads and fleets of merchant ships that carried the products of the Mayas and Incas over an industrial land" (Figure 8). Mason connected Maya industry to American industry, imbuing their ancient culture with ideas of capitalism and technology to connect them as the natural progenitors of 20th century American society (Figure 9). Connecting the ancient Maya culture to modern America further established a connection between the two peoples, allowing 20th century Americans to replace modern Maya as the rightful heirs to the Maya culture. This twofold erasure and replacement created a reality in

[20] Mason, Gregory. "Cities That Passed in a Night: New Light on the Tragic History of the Mayas". Extract from World To-day, London, April 1927. 481.

[21] "Mayan Explorers Face Jungle Peril". The New York Times, 5 Jan, 1926. pg. 5.

[22] Mason, Gregory. "Cities That Passed in a Night: New Light on the Tragic History of the Mayas". 481.

[23] Mason, Gregory. "America's 'Egypt' in the Maya Cities of Yucatan." The New York Times. May 23, 1926.

[24] Mason, Gregory. "Cities That Passed in a Night: New Light on the Tragic History of the Mayas". Extract from World To-day, London, April 1927. 481.

[25] "Mayan Explorers Face Jungle Peril". The New York Times, 5 Jan, 1926. pg. 5.

which American claims to resources and material culture of Central America became justifiable.

A modern Maya and some of the settlements of today. Both form a sorry contrast with the past.

1000 Years Before Columbus

By Gregory Mason

Ancient America Was Already a Land of Business Men, Recent Archeological Discoveries Show, With Well-Developed Industries, Good Roads and Fleets of Merchant Ships That Carried the Products of the Mayas and Incas Over an Industrial Land

Figure 8: The headline of an article written by Mason entitled "1000 Years Before Columbus." Notable quotes include the image caption: "A modern Maya and some of the settlements of today. Both form a sorry contrast with the past" and the byline: "Ancient America Was Already a Land of Business Men, Recent Archaeological Discoveries Show…". Date unknown. Williams College Special Collections.

a. "First Families"

Gregory Mason existed at "the crosscurrents of institutional, scholarly, and popular interest in ancient civilizations of the New World": the economic, intellectual, and journalistic elements of his career reflected the entangled web of interactions and institutions at the heart of U.S.-Central American relations of the

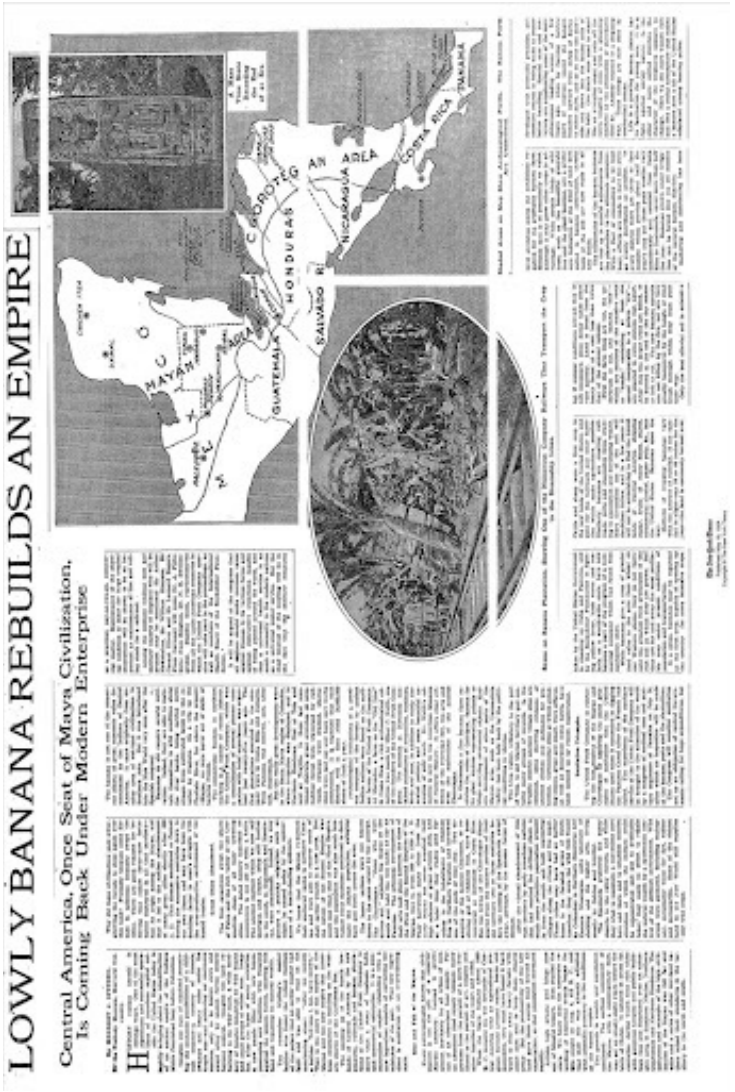

Figure 9: An article written by Herbert Spinden for The New York Times, May 1924.

period.[26] Mason's writing and his work as a whole was characterized by a complicated network of elements: connections to museum institutions and chicle companies, sensational accounts of expeditions, and undertones of American intellectual imperialism and exceptionalism. At the heart of his vast quantity of archaeological writing, however, was his commitment to "man's perpetual quest to find out where he has come from and what it

[26] Wren, L. and Nygrad, T. (2015). "The State of Research in the Cochuah Region of Quintana Roo". *The Maya of the Cochuah Region: Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on the Northern Lowlands* (ed. Justine M. Shaw). University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque. 24.

is all about."[27] Gregory Mason believed that the answers to this deeper question that he had been pondering his entire career could come from the ancient Maya. He was, to his credit, a firm proponent of the significance of their achievements, and made an effort to depict the ancient Maya not as savages but innovators to the larger American public. As an explorer, he uncovered important new sites that contributed to new understandings of ancient Maya culture in his time. As a writer, he celebrated the astronomy, industry, art, and architecture of the Maya to a wide audience, providing the general population with a positive portrait of what was to him a wondrous ancient Central American people. His journalism, in the form of "popular archaeology," was key to the establishment of the Maya in public American consciousness and the advancement of the archaeological discipline. He deserves recognition as a prime mover in the field of Maya archaeology in the early twentieth century.

Mason's career, however, was situated within a complex web of power that spanned two countries and multiple disciplines. The United States and Central America were connected socially, intellectually, and economically as America made increasingly intense incursions into the Yucatan Peninsula in search of natural resources and Maya artifacts. The driving force behind American imperialism in Central America in the first half of the 20th century was an interconnected triangle of archaeology, intellectual institutions, and corporate interests. In an ever-intensifying cycle, museums provided funding and prestige for archaeologists, who retrieved artifacts and won clout for their institutional backers. Chicle companies provided infrastructure and capital for both museums and archaeologists, and in return archaeologists provided public relations that supported American corporate interests in Central America. Journalism created a connection between the ancient Maya and modern America, dismissing their modern descendants despite their contributions to the American archaeological project and creating a gap in the perceived line of historical progress for American institutions to fill. The cooperation of these forces created a system that sustained American influence in the region through infrastructure creation, extraction of resources, exploitation of local populations, and the manufacturing and molding of American public interest. The history of Maya archaeology cannot be fully understood without consideration of these mechanisms.

Archaeology should be recognized as an influential component of American imperial strategy, and archaeologists should acknowledge the larger economic and social mechanisms that have influenced and continue to affect their intellectual work. Though archaeological practice has significantly evolved since the early 20th century, hundreds of objects acquired by Gregory Mason still sit today in American museum collections. While the ancient Maya received recognition, their descendants were denied ownership of their culture, both materially and intellectually. Making the modern Maya a people without a history made it possible to co-opt their past, dismiss their present, and restrict their future. American infrastructure and power in the region and perceptions of the Maya as a diminished people, created and maintained through the triangular intellectual-archaeological-economic relationship, continued to enable the exploitation of the Yucatan by the U.S. well into the 20th century and continue to have ramifications today. This should not fully diminish, however, the achievement and work of those like Gregory Mason in the early days of the discipline. Archaeology can maintain the spirit of exploration, discovery, and cultural appreciation instilled in its foundations while taking lessons from the past to be more thoughtful and intentional about its execution.

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[27] Mason, Gregory. "America's Buried Past." The Saturday Evening Post, January 19, 1929. 38.