A HUGE DISCOVERY OF ANCIENT MAYA TREASURES

BY TOM CitOLEY

THE ARCHAEOLOGIST Guillermo de Anda had some good luck last month. He was searching for a sacred well beneath the ancient Maya city of Chichén Itzá, in Mexico, when a farmer named Luis Unío offered to lead him to a cave that might have some old pottery inside. Unío, 68, remembered that an archaeologist visited it in the 1960s, but he didn’t excavate it. Instead, he asked Unío and his neighbors to seal the entrance, and the contents remained undisturbed. De Anda, who studies the ancient Maya — indigenous Mesoamericans who lived in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize — saw the chance to go inside.

But getting to the possible treasures deep inside Balamkú (“The Cave of the Jaguar God”) wasn’t easy. De Anda had to crawl on his stomach and squeeze through tight passageways for hours. At one point a sometimes-coral seafoam bloomed his path. “It seemed like the snake was guarding the treasure,” he says. He turned back, and returned the next day, only to find the snake in the same place. “After that, there was a local shaman — a traditional healer and spiritual guide — told me that the snake was giving no permission to go inside. I didn’t need to be told.” De Anda says, “But I was still afraid when I went back the fourth time. Luckily the snake didn’t strike, it just watched me as I passed.”

After about 150 yards the tunnel opened into the front of several spacious chambers, and de Anda’s headlamp lit up something spectacular: a sea of sacred artifacts! The rooms were filled with ceramic incense burners, water vessels and dozens of other items that Maya woodworkers probably used as part of a religious ceremony more than 1,000 years ago. “I recall when I first found it,” de Anda says. “It was like traveling back in time.”

Why did the ancients leave these deep inside Balamkú? The Maya thought of caves as openings to the underworld. De Anda, who announced the find last month, thinks they may have come to the cave during a ritual, doubtless to do gifts that would persuade the gods to send rain.

In the past, archaeologists might have moved these artifacts to museums, but de Anda’s team will keep them in the cave. Because the objects have not been touched, the researchers have a rare opportunity to study them in their original setting. More research will help them better understand the ancient rituals and cultures — and may even help to solve the mystery of why the residents of Chichén Itzá abandoned their grand city hundreds of years ago.

For more on the size and fullness of the Maya world, turn the page

HUMANS ARE wailing revolutionaries. In our warm, sweat-drenched bodies, latent bacteria and viruses can quickly grow. And as we sneeze or cough, we can spread those germs. Now imagine that we sneeze or cough, and we spew those germs on an object for two seconds. On the surface of our skin, bacteria can survive for days, while viruses can last for months. On the surface of another person’s skin, bacteria can survive for weeks, and viruses can last for years.

That group includes babies, elderly people and those who are being treated for serious conditions like cancer.

What makes us contagious?

1. You get a cold — or, say, for measles or the chickenpox. Congratulations! You’ve probably already had your shot. It’s much harder to get sick from that disease. That’s because the first is filled with the piece of virus or bacteria that triggers your body to build up its germ-fighting antibodies. You now have an immunity shield if you encounter the virus or bacteria in the future.

2. If you’re protected, that means the people you spend time with are also less likely to be infected, because you won’t pass the disease along to them.

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5. If the people you spend time with have also become vaccinated against that disease, the people they spend time with will have less likely to be infected. It’s an immune chain reaction. If enough people are vaccinated, a disease will begin to fade. That’s because it’s much harder for diseases to make people sick, spread uncontrollably or cause death.

6. If herd immunity is widespread enough, diseases can even vanish from the entire world. In 1980, health workers around the globe managed to eradicate smallpox. Now that we know what is happening, we can work to eradicate other diseases, such as polio and measles.

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