

## Archaeologist makes 'once in a lifetime' find

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rrivet@tulane.edu

A team of archaeologists led by an adjunct faculty member in the Tulane University Department of Anthropology made a huge find when it unearthed a [well-preserved Mayan frieze](#) dating back to 600 A.D. in the Mayan city of Holmul, a site in northern Guatemala.



An archaeologist cleans an inscription below a high relief stucco frieze found in the ancient Mayan city of Holmul in northern Guatemala. The team was led by Tulane adjunct faculty member Francisco Estrada-Belli. (Photo from Francisco Estrada-Belli)

Francisco Estrada-Belli, a collaborator with the [Middle American Research Institute](#) at Tulane, and his team happened upon the 26-foot-long, 8-foot-high stucco sculpture while exploring a tunnel left open by looters.

"This is an extraordinary finding that occurs only once in the life of an archaeologist," Estrada-Belli told the press during a joint announcement with the Guatemalan government on Wednesday (Aug. 7).

The find is of particular note because of how intact it is, says Tulane archaeologist Marcello Canuto.

"This frieze is incredibly well-preserved, and because of that it's giving us great

information,” says Canuto, director of MARI. “Sites like this can tell us a tremendous amount about the ancient Maya.”

Beyond the artistic value of the site, Canuto says the hieroglyphs, which are still being deciphered, tell a story about the installation of a king and a “game of alliances” between different kingdoms in the region. The information being gleaned from the frieze is showing the political environment in the area and the strategic importance of Holmul, a development he calls “very exciting.”

“It's an incredibly important find for that site because it puts it into historical context within the region,” Canuto says. “It's a piece of the larger puzzle that puts the Holmul site into a larger sociopolitical conversation.”

Estrada-Belli will return to New Orleans from Guatemala this week, and Canuto says he looks forward to learning more about the findings at Holmul.

“Because he's working here, he can give talks and be able to explain his discoveries in and around MARI. It's a fantastic resource.”